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2015, What A Year...

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Another Top 50 is under our belt. Like most years, it was a battle, and there will of course be games you think don't belong on the list, and games you love that didn't make it. That's the nature of the beast; even as the editor-in-chief, not all of my picks made the list. But the Top 50 represents the collected opinions of all the *Game Informer* editors, and hopefully helps you find games to play that you may have missed.

It was a great year in gaming, and one of most diverse. Not only did we have more choice in race and gender than I can remember (though we still have a ways to go), we had more variety in the types of games you could play. Just about every genre was represented, and every day we saw more of the genre-bending games that we as journalists have trouble classifying. A good problem to have, as it means games are growing and doing new and innovative things – blurring the lines that were established so many decades ago.

I enjoyed a wide variety of games in 2015, but found fewer titles that really hit me directly in the gut than in previous years. I enjoyed Halo 5, but the game didn't sing to me like it did to its core fans. Destiny, on the other hand, hit it out of the park for me, but I'm sure many still hate my favorite game of the year. That's how the industry works, as games become both attuned to their audiences and game developers explore the boundaries of game design. At the same time, the amount of variety available increasingly lets us find those games that scratch our own personal itches.

For example, one of my crowning achievements of 2015 was beating Bloodborne, which I simultaneously hated and loved. The game is made for a specific audience; its beginning is so poorly designed that it intentionally drives away those that don't have the heart to persevere. But if you do, it's truly a treat. Others view that opening salvo of pain to be the game's genius and what makes it stand out above the pack.

Trying to make a game as challenging as possible is a trend I also see prevalent in the indie space, which in my mind limits the reach of certain games. However, many see it as a welcome opposite to the big-budget games that offer too much hand-holding or have been homogenized by too many focus groups. I see games that are trying to appease classic gamers, but have forgotten that many of the older gamers they are appealing to don't have the twitch skills they once possessed (you can count me in that group). These games are great when they resonate with you, but we certainly have more titles that are not as easy to identify as a "must play" for everyone.

So cheers to 2015, another great year in gaming. And may 2016 continue to innovate and surprise gamers with new challenges and genre-busting treats.

Enjoy the issue.

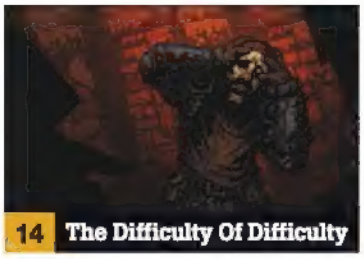
Cheers,

» 28

Doom

The game that put shooters on the map is back! We go hands-on to find out how id Software is simultaneously modernizing Doom and taking an old-school approach.
by Matt Bertz

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter



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» 4 Feedback
Readers pre-emptively complain about our Top 50 list, ask us a perplexing question about Yoshi, and offer some not particularly helpful feedback on our review of Star Wars Battlefront.

» 8 Connect
We've got the latest on Hideo Kojima's departure from Konami, Sony's PlayStation Experience lineup, and what we want from Nintendo's mysterious NX console. We also examine how difficult it is to make a difficult game.

» 70 Previews
We had a fantastic year of game releases in 2015, but 2016 is already stacking up as a great sequel. This month we take a look at Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, Final Fantasy VII Remake, For Honor, the sequel to Ni No Kuni, and more.

» 84 Reviews
2015 is officially behind us, but that doesn't mean we don't have opinions on the games that waited until the last second to release. We have scores for Just Cause 3, Xenoblade Chronicles X, Rainbow Six Siege, and one 2016 game: Amplitude.

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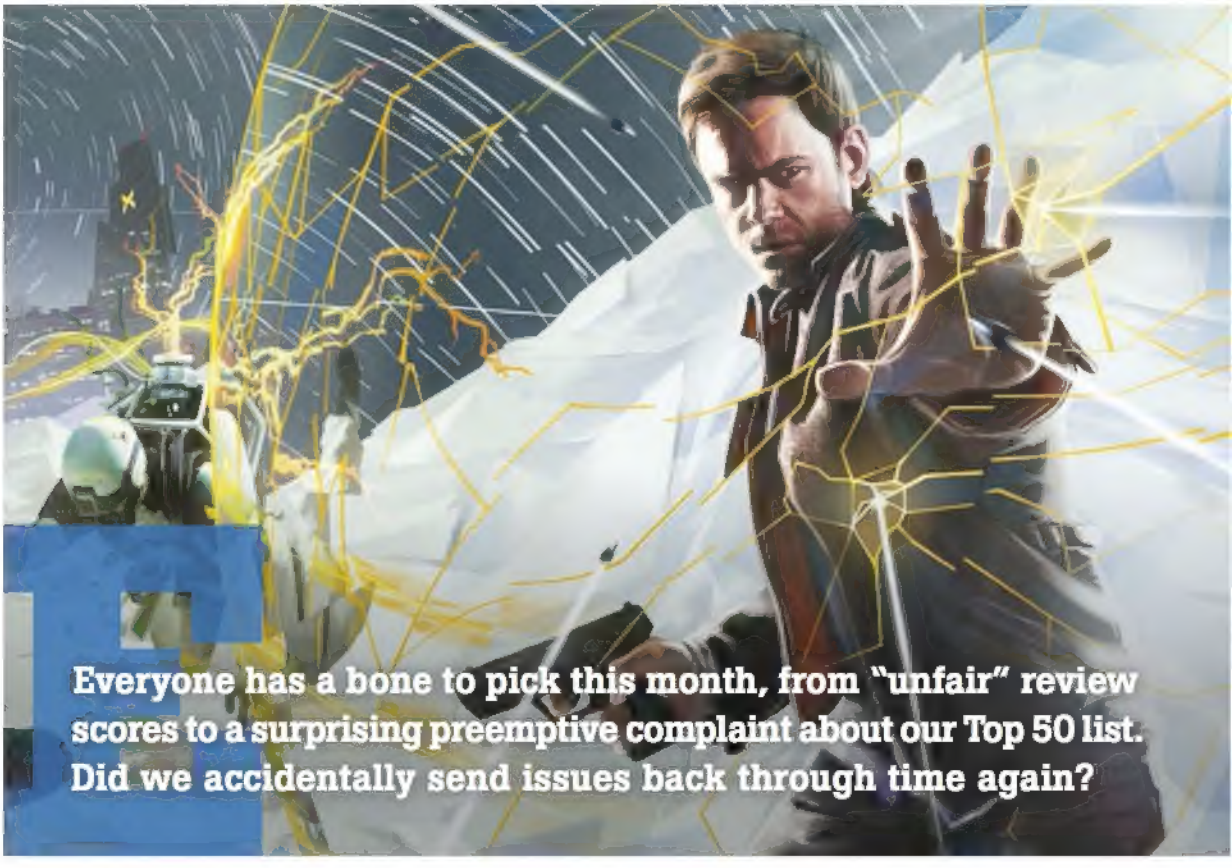

Everyone has a bone to pick this month, from "unfair" review scores to a surprising preemptive complaint about our Top 50 list. Did we accidentally send issues back through time again?

By The Numbers

I just finished reading your review of Star Wars Battlefront, and I couldn't help but notice that you missed a key piece of information. On top of the maps that are included at launch, there are two free DLC maps releasing in December, which brings the total of maps from 12 to 14. Granted, only four of the original 12 are available in Walker Assault and Supremacy, but that will increase to five with the DLC. Fourteen maps is nothing to sneer at, and it sits well over the map offerings of other games – Battlefield 4 only launched with 10 maps, and Call of Duty Black Ops 3 only had 12 maps. I am curious why this is worse in Battlefront than in other shooters?

Tim Frieling
via email

It appears you answered your own question, Tim. Unlike the other shooters you mentioned, Battlefront's maps are restricted to specific modes, with the best modes featuring only a small handful of locations. However, our complaints about Battlefront's lack of content weren't limited to the map count – as we stated in our review, the number of weapons, gear, customization options, and general progression also lack the depth of other shooters. The two free DLC maps are certainly a welcome addition, but they don't solve the problem. Seeing as how they also weren't available at launch, they were not factored into our review.

Try Harder?

I'm worried that nowadays game developers only make their games to be bought; they create just enough good content to sell their game. They should make their game so it can be the best game possible, so that people will remember it and want to continue playing. An example would be Bethesda: They have been known to release very buggy games and Fallout 4 did not disappoint in that form. Bug-filled from the start and yet again they have not listened to their PC fans and tied the speed of the engine to the framerate. I think we should pressure game developers to make the best games they can, and being the media, you have the ability to do that.

Nathan Fiske
via email

Sorry, Nathan, but choosing Bethesda as your example of a developer that isn't trying hard enough isn't helping your argument. Fallout 4 certainly has its share of problems, but the sheer scope of the game and Bethesda's support for the modding community goes far beyond "just enough good content to sell their game." While it may not always feel like it, the truth is every developer wants to make the best game possible – money, time, and ability may all affect the quality of the final product, but a lack of enthusiasm is rarely ever the problem.

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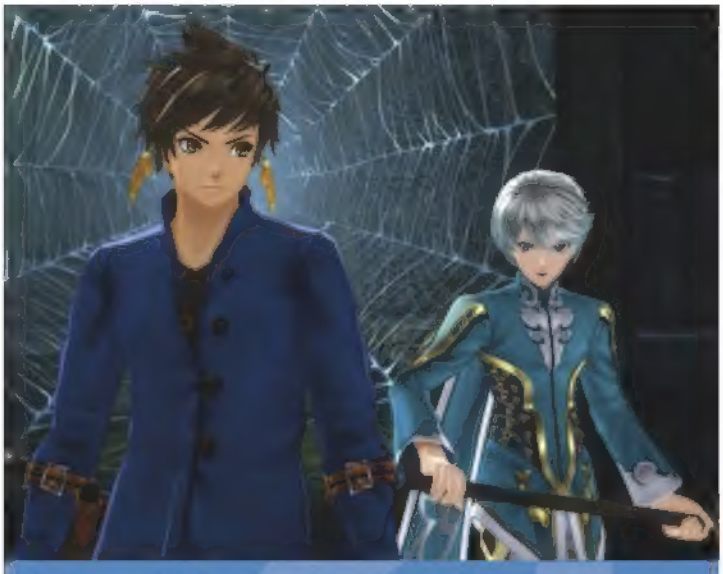


Down With The Sickness?

I can't believe that after all these years you still have such a prejudice against JRPGs. This last issue has concrete evidence: You gave Tales of Zesteria such a low score – 6.5 – and for reasons that you praised Undertale, your game of the month. Zesteria's save points are archaic and detract from the gameplay? Guess what other game has save points? I will admit that the game has flaws, but to give it such an underwhelming score? The story is solid and the new gameplay elements make it immersive. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm really tired of these games getting low scores for no other reason than you people think that they are somehow "less than." So f--- you in your f---ing anus.

Sarah P.
via email

Wow, that escalated quickly, huh? But we understand: Random outbursts are a common symptom of JRPG Worship Syndrome. So is selective reading, confusing concrete evidence with no evidence at all, and a fondness for sweeping generalizations – like construing our dislike of dated save systems that require copious backtracking as a universal condemnation of any game that features save points. For more information on JRPG Worship Syndrome, please consult your doctor.

Hot And Bothered

Both Tri Force Heroes and Xenoblade Chronicles X received scores of 7.25. The minimum score for allowance onto G.I.'s yearly Top 50 list is a 7.5. Either something shady is going on with other publishers to get their games guaranteed for the Top 50, or the selfishness of two of your staff introduced a sudden, unexpected snag for two games with redeeming qualities. Tri Force Heroes may have a bit of a repetitive gameplay loop, but the quirky charm and fun multiplayer should earn it at least a 7.5. Everything that Xenoblade Chronicles X does right should earn it at least an 8, regardless of the way the good stuff is accessed – I mean, Matt Miller of all reviewers should be able to admire the realism of having to walk from the farthest end of Mira to New Los Angeles if he appreciated the Sony-backed walking simulator Journey enough to give it a 9. If G.I. as a business gave Star Wars: Battlefront a 7.5 just to allow the possibility of it being on the Top 50 despite its shortcomings, and not Nintendo's games, then your system looks suspicious, fraud or no fraud. I'm typing this because I know darn well that a majority of the gaming community would rather see X on your list than Battlefront.

Stephen Lambros
via email

We have no such minimum score rule for our Top 50 list, and no game's inclusion or exclusion on the list is decided by a single editor. On an unrelated note, we'd like to take a minute to discuss with you the symptoms of a serious illness known as Nintendo Worship Syndrome...

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is local multiplayer dead?"

Nope.

"And if so, why is it dead?"

Seriously, it's not.

"Why do you guys receive so much hate mail?"

It's the primary communication method of haters.

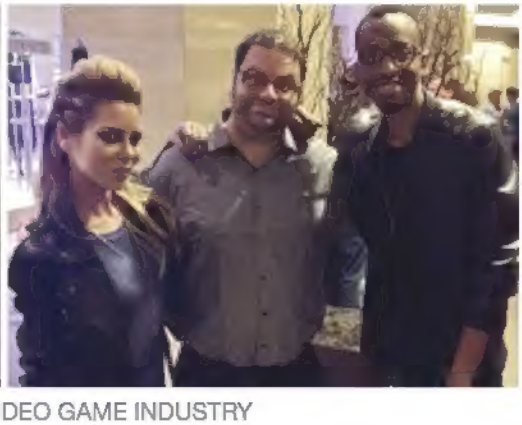
Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Maybe have more people play so their accusations are more accurate"

Question Of The Month:

What 2015 game did you end up playing the most, and why?

gi spy



PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) In loving memory of Michael Gitler, friend, family, and former *Game Informer* photographer. **(Center)** Dan Tack took a break from the Blizzard revelries to snap a picture with BlizzCon hosts Michele Morrow and Malik Forté. **(Right)** Dan Tack also "crashed" a furry convention in Chicago this month, because that's how he rolls.

- Current-Gen Improvement Suggestions
- Review Score Gripes
- Continued Destiny Hype/Hate
- Undertale Admiration
- Calls For More Local Multiplayer
- Top 50 Complaints (From The Future?!)

Room For Improvement

In issue 272, we asked readers what improvements they'd like to see made to the current-gen consoles. Backward compatibility was the most popular request, while others focused on hardware improvements. Here are some of the responses.

I would love to see the PlayStation 4 able to use external hard drives. Plug it in the USB port and voila!

Kerry Brown

I'd like to see more backward-compatible games for Xbox One. While they have announced that games such as Halo: Reach and CoD: Black Ops are coming soon, I want more. Games like The Orange Box, Portal 2, and XCOM: Enemy Unknown.

Jack Newman

The PS4 controller needs better battery life and could use some durability improvements. They seem to wear out quickly, especially on the thumb sticks. Maybe a cool PS4 Gold/Pro (whatever they name it) controller similar to the Xbox Elite controller?

Chris Finch

What's Up With Yoshi?

As a lifelong Mario fan, I really enjoyed your retrospective on the Super Mario Bros. series (Making Mario, issue 271). It was wonderful to see the history of the Mushroom Kingdom so well compiled, and to see you address the debate regarding Yoshi's place in the series. That said, there is one thing that has always bothered me about Yoshi: gender. Yoshi is usually referred to as "he" (even by director Takashi Tezuka in the article), yet Yoshi's signature attack involves the character throwing eggs. Only females lay eggs. Has Yoshi's gender been mistaken all along?

Lilja Strang
via email

Based on our extensive research, it appears that Yoshis reproduce asexually, and are biologically neither male nor female. However, some games set in the Mario universe clearly contradict this, depicting gendered Yoshis that engage in traditional mating habits. The bottom line? Nintendo clearly hasn't given enough thought to this extremely nerdy and pointless topic.

(Left) During this year's PlayStation Experience, Shea caught up with Street Fighter V producer Yoshinori Ono, who still really loves Blanka. (Right) While Shea was busy trying out Rez Infinite, Enhance CEO Tetsuya Mizuguchi showed off the true potential of VR: photobombing unsuspecting players.

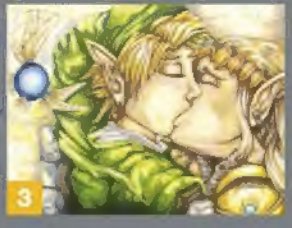
WINNER

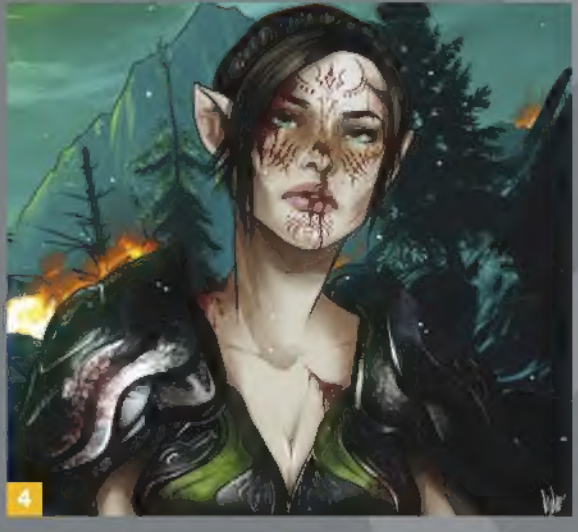
1 Nicolas Foster
After Hideo Kojima's departure, Konami is doing weird things with Metal Gear

2 Erika Hunter
We wouldn't mind seeing a Disney-created Zelda movie with this art style

3 Tilly Valentine
Navi doesn't know the meaning of personal space

4 Bobo Biloff
If cosmetic damage was accurately shown in games, most characters wouldn't be standing after a few battles





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(Left) Meet the newest member of the Game Informer crew, Javy Gwaltney. Don't worry: Despite the weird name, he's a pretty cool guy. **(Right)** Behold, another trio of extraordinary interns (from left): Parker Lemke, Joseph Knoop, and Marcus Stewart. Thanks for all the hard work, guys!

connect

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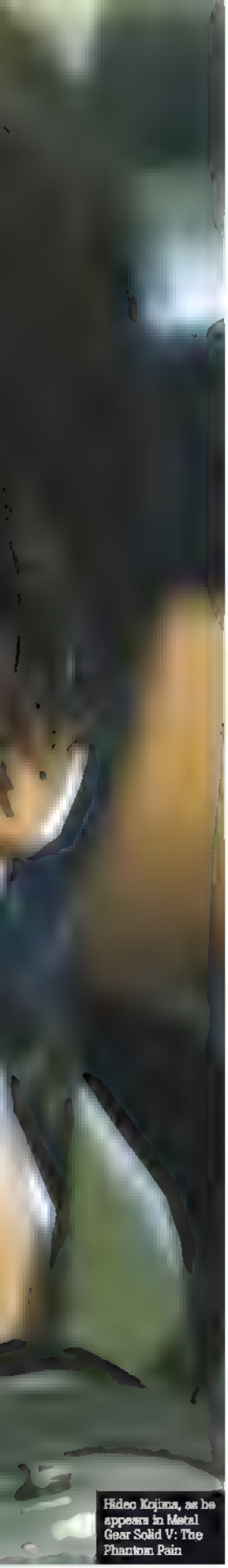
Kojima Finds A New Home

The Metal Gear mastermind is officially free from Konami and has already found a new partner



Hideo Kojima, as he appears in Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Bad breakups between creative visionaries and their employers are nothing new for the games industry, but legendary designer Hideo Kojima has had a particularly rough year. From removing Kojima's name from the box art of Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain to canceling his collaboration with Guillermo del Toro on the promising Silent Hills reboot, Konami's treatment of its former superstar has been raising eyebrows for months. The publisher's actions went from unfriendly to downright vindictive when Geoff Keighley revealed that Konami's lawyers had banned Kojima from attending *The Game Awards 2015* show, preventing him from accepting the Action Adventure Game of the Year award for Metal Gear Solid V. After months of Konami insisting that Kojima was still with the company and merely on vacation, the split has finally been made official. Kojima wasted no time moving on.

Kojima announced his departure on Twitter with a polite tweet. "My employment contract with Konami has been terminated as of Dec 15th, so today marks a new start for me. I'm committed to be involved in creative activities for as long as I live. Look forward to what's coming." The message received tens of thousands of likes and retweets from fans.

Those fans didn't have to wait long to learn Kojima's future plans. He immediately followed up the news of his departure from Konami with an announcement that he has formed a new independent studio (once again called Kojima Productions) and that he is teaming up with Sony for a new project.

Kojima revealed the partnership in a video alongside Sony president and CEO Andrew House, stating that the studio's first game will be a new franchise created in collaboration with PlayStation.

Additional details about the project were posted, then subsequently taken down, in a Q&A by SCEE European community manager Lucas Liaskos. The post revealed that Kojima Productions' first title is a console exclusive for the PlayStation 4, but will come to PC at a later time. Liaskos' post also asserts that Sony is publishing the title, and that it is not related to Metal Gear or Silent Hill. Liaskos stated on Twitter that he was asked to take the post down, so the information within must be taken with a grain of salt. So far, however, none of the details contradict the official announcement from Kojima and House.

While other information about the new project is currently under wraps, one fact was apparent in the announcement video: House was full of praise for Kojima, making it abundantly clear that Sony values their newfound partnership as well as the creator himself. Given the rocky relationship Kojima had with Konami, we're sure he appreciates the extra TLC. ◆

PSX 2015 Recap

PlayStation gives fans glimpses of its future

In just its second year, the PlayStation Experience feels poised to explode into something bigger. Started as a way to showcase upcoming titles to fans and make big announcements isolated from the competition, the show's sophomore effort took those ideas further. ***by Brian Shea***

PlayStation Experience doesn't attract the shoulder-to-shoulder crowds of Gamescom or the media masses of E3, but the result is a much more attendee-friendly show. Walking through the two levels of the floor proved much easier than either of those expos, and even in the middle of the day, wide-open floor space was common. If the "sold out" signs plastered on the entrances to the convention hall are any indication, the extra elbow room wasn't due to underwhelming badge sales.

The low-key atmosphere meant that attendees weren't forced to choose a few select games and spend their days waiting in line to see them as is common with other shows. Fans paid PlayStation back for that with an atmosphere of enthusiasm. Those in attendance were largely enthusiasts, with some fans lining up for the keynote over 12 hours prior to the doors opening. As the show opened, attendees sprinted to the games they wanted to see. The whole event had a fan-friendly feel, which was further driven home by the opening festivities at the keynote address.

At other conventions, Sony shares the spotlight with competitors, but at the PlayStation Experience, the stage is all its own. Sony capitalized, delivering a focused spectacle event that fans ate up.

Playing the PS4's strongest card first, the presentation began with all new footage of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End from Naughty Dog. The scene showed the heartfelt reunion between Nathan Drake and his brother Sam, and introduced a new mechanic allowing for branching conversations during story moments.

Sony ran down a flurry of new details surrounding exclusive titles, including release dates for Ratchet & Clank and MLB The Show 16. Fans of the gorgeous Ni no Kuni were also pleased to learn that Level-5 is bringing a sequel to PS4.

Capcom's Yoshinori Ono hit the stage to show off the final combatant in the Street Fighter V launch roster, as well as the first wave of downloadable characters, but it wasn't the only fighting series to shine. Fans of the long-running King of Fighters series were treated to new details about King of Fighters XIV, including a roster of 50 fighters and a new three-on-three online battle mode.

Square Enix showed off the first in-game footage of the hotly anticipated Final Fantasy VII Remake as well. The game has been updated in several ways, including current-gen graphics and new combat mechanics. Remake looks very impressive, but the excitement of this new footage was overshadowed by negative reactions to the news that it will be launched in multiple parts rather than one cohesive experience.

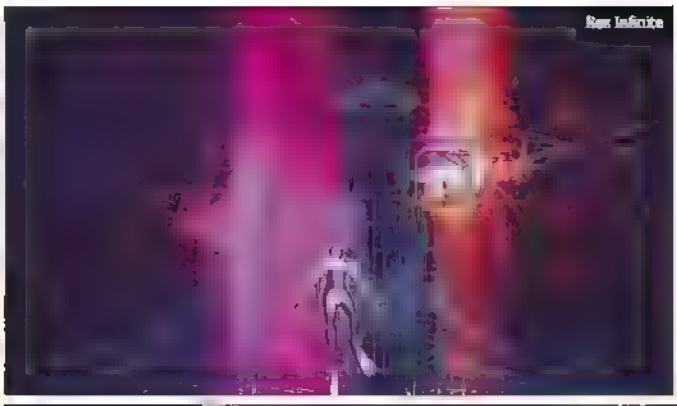
Though the first footage debuted earlier that week at The Game Awards, PSX attendees were among the first to play Far Cry Primal. Ubisoft also featured For Honor, the sword combat multiplayer title announced at E3 2015. For more on these titles, head to our Previews section on page 70.

PSX 2015 also gave us more evidence that PlayStation has forged close relationships with studios previously associated with Xbox. Epic Games and Bungie both had stage time at the PlayStation keynote, respectively showing off Paragon, an action-oriented MOBA coming to PS4, and Destiny's Sparrow Racing League event.

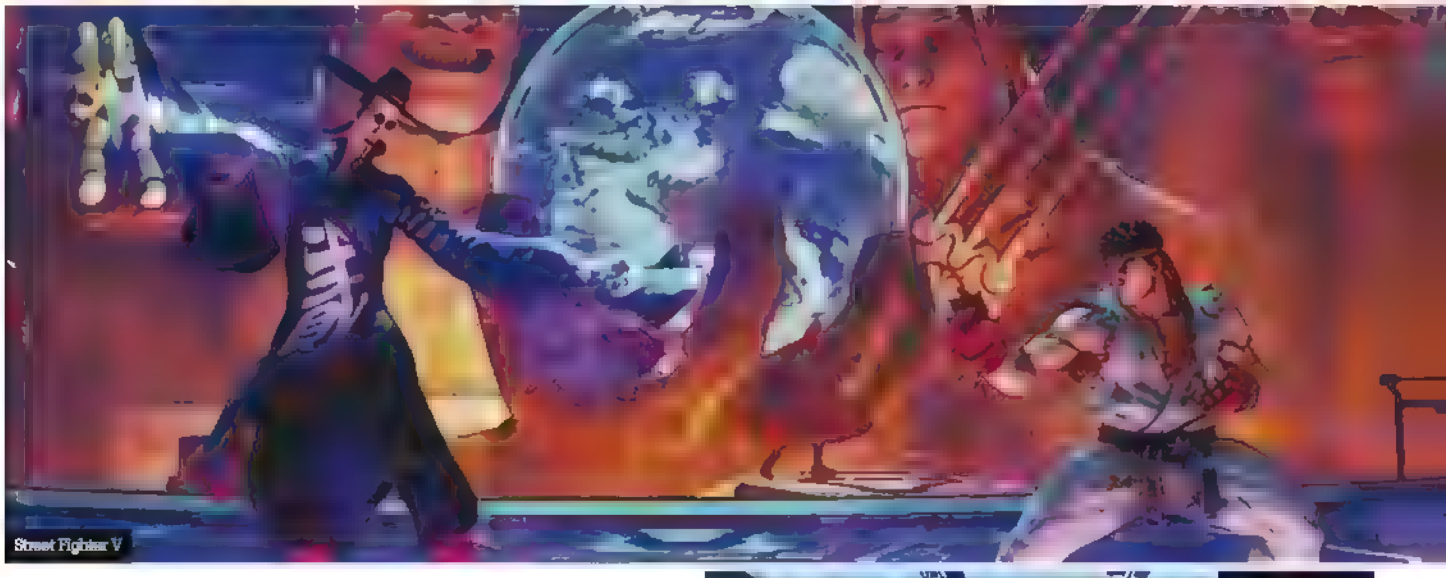
Developers and publishers who didn't have the wow factor of being on stage at the keynote created their own spectacles on the show floor. From Software and Bandai Namco brought an impressive Dark Souls III statue of a character brutally killing an enemy (complete with a fountain that blasted fake blood into the air during photo opportunities). Gearbox and 2K built an impressive setup for Battleborn, and The Last Guardian gave fans a chance to interact with a video of a life-sized Trico. Unfortunately, we didn't receive any new information about the oft-delayed title from Team Ico.

Many fans also had their first chance to check out PlayStation VR, the company's virtual reality

Destiny's Sparrow Racing League


Rez Infinite

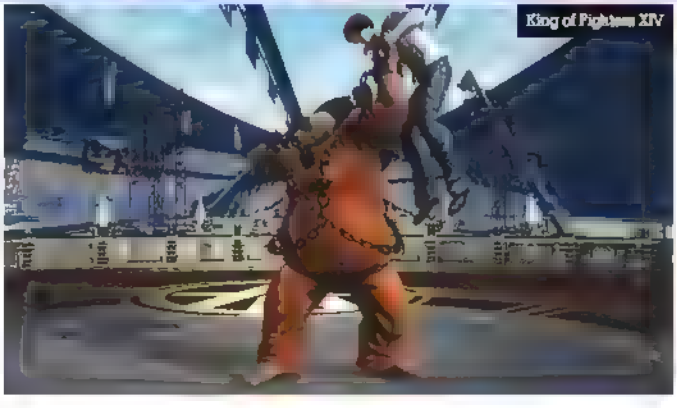
Final Fantasy VII Remake


Street Fighter V

endeavor. At the keynote, Sony announced several new games coming to PlayStation VR. The intense dogfighting of Ace Combat 7 could prove to be a killer app for those who can handle the rush. In addition, we got a look at Golem, Rez Infinite, Psychonauts in the Rhombus of Ruin, and more.

On the floor, the uninitiated could slap on a PlayStation VR headset and begin to understand why so many are ecstatic for virtual reality to come to retail. From the frantic mechanized multiplayer combat of Guerrilla Cambridge's Rigs to the first-person shooting of SCE London's London Heist, attendees checked out the emerging tech.

Looking ahead, we are optimistic about the future of PlayStation Experience. Sony has demonstrated that it knows how to put on a great event that can whip its most passionate and loyal fans into a frenzy. PlayStation Experience wasn't just a fluke during its first year, and if it can keep this momentum up, there's no reason Sony should stop doing this annually.


King of Fighters XIV

What We Want From The Nintendo NX

The next console from Nintendo needs to be a winner. We have ideas for how the company can modernize its approach

Nintendo is at a crossroads. New president Tatsumi Kashimi has taken over the leadership role following the passing of the late Satoru Iwata. After a previous reluctance, the company is moving into the mobile market thanks to a deal with free-to-play specialists DeNA. The Wii U is last in the three-horse home console race, and delays to some of its software like The Legend of Zelda and Star Fox Zero haven't aided its cause. The 3DS library is also drying up rapidly.

With so many things in flux we have a lot of questions and hopes for Nintendo's next system, codenamed the Nintendo NX. Not much is known about the NX at this time. Nintendo has promised to deliver more details about the platform this year. However, with the PS4 at the top of the console mountain and Xbox One finally finding its way after a good holiday season, all eyes are on Nintendo to see how it responds. Given the company's state of affairs, gamers hope the NX is successful enough to help Nintendo rebound from the Wii U. Here are some of things we think the system needs to do to make that happen. ***by Matthew Kato***

HARDWARE IN THE MAKING

We don't know what the NX intends to be, but Nintendo did shed light on what it won't be. "I can assure you we're not building the next version of Wii or Wii U," Kashimi told *Time* regarding the NX. "It's something unique and different." Zigging as the rest of the industry zags has been the blueprint for the past two systems. Can the company successfully march to the beat of its own drummer while still capturing the imagination of the public like the Wii did? Also, what kinds of lessons will Nintendo draw from the Wii U's relative failure for the NX?

Multiple sources have told *The Wall Street Journal* that the console will be powerful enough to match the current competition from Sony and Microsoft, and will feature both a home-bound component and one you can take with you outside of the home. Both units would work with each other, as well as separately on their own. Last December, Nintendo filed a patent for a controller dominated by a touch-screen display that also contained traditional features such as sticks, inputs, and shoulder buttons. Whether this is for the NX's controller or just one of the many patents that companies file that never see the light of day remains to be seen, but it makes sense as a hybrid of the kind of controller we've become accustomed to and the Wii U's Gamepad.

If the controller is indeed dominated by the touchscreen display, it could be a functional mobile handheld unit as well. While we imagine the standalone unit's distance to the home unit will be tethered via wi-fi, it would be great if some sort of crossplay functionality makes every NX title playable on the traveling unit in public. At a minimum, it will be interesting to see the synergy between the controller and main system.

Speaking of being on-the-go, the 3DS handheld currently fits that bill successfully for Nintendo, who says that it has no plans to move away from its tradition of having a standalone handheld. As far as the 3DS and the NX communicating, Nintendo hasn't traditionally done this extensively with its handhelds and home consoles. The company's desire to keep the profitable 3DS and its successors relevant could draw a line between its traditional handhelds and the NX.

In broader terms, we hope Nintendo learned its lesson from the Wii U in the hardware horsepower department – lagging so far behind the other consoles is not a good idea. It's early enough in the lifecycles of the PS4 and Xbox One that the NX could easily get up to speed and also be in a good position to deliver this console generation's evolving experiences in the future.

Another patent filed by Nintendo describes a system without an optical drive, but support for an external hard drive and a card slot. If the NX doesn't have an optical disc drive and goes all-in on digital games and away from disc-based games – as well as DVD/Blu-ray playback – it would lower the cost of the unit but also be an interesting step away from traditional retail games. This approach could also use the card slot for proprietary game carts, which would be a step back to older Nintendo consoles and probably incur increased costs for third-party publishers. Again, however, patents are often just ideas.

While matching the other systems' power and content delivery methods are good ideas, we certainly wouldn't want the NX to just be exactly like the rest of the crowd. Perhaps more fully using the popular Amiibos is a way to differentiate the NX and could maximize the figures' abilities beyond just being cute collectibles.

ALL ABOUT THE GAMES

The Wii and Wii U have been uneven on the software front, featuring some great first-party software, the occasional third-party title that hits the mark, and a lot of forgettable filler. It doesn't have to be this way with the NX.

Nintendo needs to buckle down and improve the direction and overall timing of its first-party lineup in the future. Franchises like Metroid and Kid Icarus should receive proper installments that dig into the core of why fans fell in love with them in the first place instead of taking sidesteps into genres and tones that are alien territory. All console manufacturers can struggle to consistently deliver first-party software from internal studios (just look at Sony in 2015), but with Nintendo's stable of stars the company could be formidable if it keeps gamers satisfied with a steady diet of quality. Backward compatibility also has the potential to open up the floodgates.

Nintendo's relationship with third parties has been strained for a while, and getting things back on track will be a big factor in the NX's potential success. Even if Nintendo bristles at its systems getting ports of games also available on other consoles, it expands a platform's library and allows gamers to use the system as their primary console. Gamers would be thrilled if the NX was the only system they had to buy and could still get the good majority of gaming experiences. Third parties would certainly welcome the opportunity to do brisk business for their entire software slates, and the better a third party is doing on a platform, the more likely it is going to want to do things like exclusives and take risks with the console. Currently, there are no confirmed games for the NX, although Square Enix has said it's considering bringing Dragon Quest X and XI to it.

Nintendo's need for better third-party support is related to how technically different the NX ends up being from the other systems. Third-party publishers and developers want the development and porting processes to be easy. Thus, Nintendo is going to have to walk the fine line between the NX's features standing out amongst the competition and facilitating new gaming experiences without being too demanding on developers' time and resources. Using a common PC infrastructure to the PS4 and Xbox One would go a long way to making ports an enticing opportunity to third-party publishers.

THE BIG DAY

When the NX comes out, the price has to be right. With all due respect to the overhead it costs to make these high-tech systems, no consumer likes sticker shock getting in the way of their excitement. If the rumors about the NX so far are to be believed, it seems a stretch that the NX will be as cheap as the Wii was when it came out for $249 in 2006. It will be interesting to see if the NX tries to match the current price points of the competition at $300 to $350, or if it will debut more toward $399 like new home systems in the past.

In terms of timing, getting too far from a 2016 release could be a problem for the NX, as the longer Nintendo waits the more entrenched the PS4 and Xbox One become in their install base and the systems' software reaches the next tier of their evolution. The NX isn't going to catch the industry-leading PS4 in sales (with more than 30 million sold to consumers) any time soon, but it hopefully should be able to deliver comparable experiences, if not unique ones. *The Wall Street Journal* report says development kits for the NX have gone out to studios, which if true, could make a late 2016 release possible.

Launch lineups are often uneven, and it's anybody's guess what we'll be playing day one on the NX. The Wii U's Zelda title was delayed from its 2015 release into 2016, sparking speculation that it would appear on both the Wii U and NX similar to how The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess came out for the GameCube as well as the Wii.

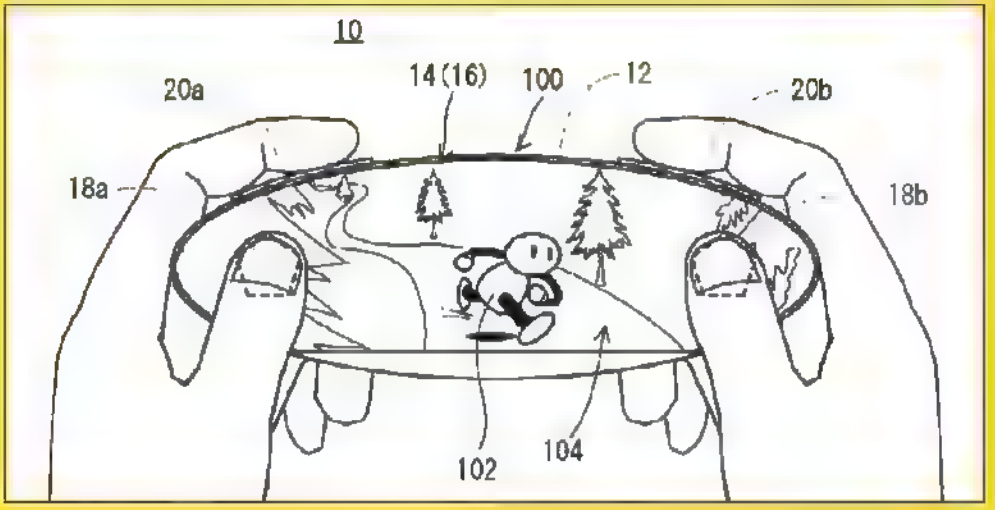
A Nintendo system debuting with a Zelda or Mario title would be a jackpot, and with improved third-party relations the initial launch period could help Nintendo boast a good representation of quality titles. The Wii U started out with a good collection of games like Batman: Arkham City and Mass Effect 3 that came out much earlier on other systems. The key for the NX will be making its launch lineup timely with other systems instead of a collection of titles that have already been out for months.

ANOTHER CHANCE AT ONLINE

Through its own hesitation, Nintendo still lags in the online space. While the Nintendo eShop has gotten up to speed with its regular influx of content – including indie titles – the company has so far obstinately made its online multiplayer and account setup non-user friendly.

Easily hooking up with friends for party gaming with universal voice-chat for all games would help bring the NX into parity with the PS4 and Xbox One. Moreover, a system-spanning gamer I.D. that's not tied to one specific piece of hardware would make transferring your data and purchased digital games a lot easier if your system goes up in smoke, migrating your content from the Wii U to the NX, and if you buy a new hardware iteration of the NX.

Nintendo says it is planning a membership service created by partner DeNA called My Nintendo as a replacement for Club Nintendo, which could facilitate easier data transfer, but we'll have to wait and see exactly what it encompasses. ♦



The Diffi
Of

culty Difficulty

The keys to making a highly challenging game that's still fun to play

by Jeff Marchiafava

For most game designers, homing in on the right degree of difficulty is akin to discovering the Holy Grail. Make a game too easy, and players breeze through its forgettable challenges with little sense of accomplishment. Make it too difficult, and players may quit out of frustration or feel too intimidated to pick up the controller in the first place. Finding the right balance is an art form in its own right, and for most modern games, the perfect difficulty setting blends seamlessly into the background as players steadily and successfully fight their way to victory.

Not every designer follows this playbook, however. Over the years, a growing number of games have opted for the punishing difficulty old-school games used to dole out with impunity, and a particular segment of players have embraced these demanding titles with open arms. From the tortuous locales and towering bosses of the Dark Souls series to the deadly labyrinths of Super Meat Boy, we spoke with a number of modern-day difficulty masters to find out how they maintain the player's enjoyment while still plying them with sinister challenges.

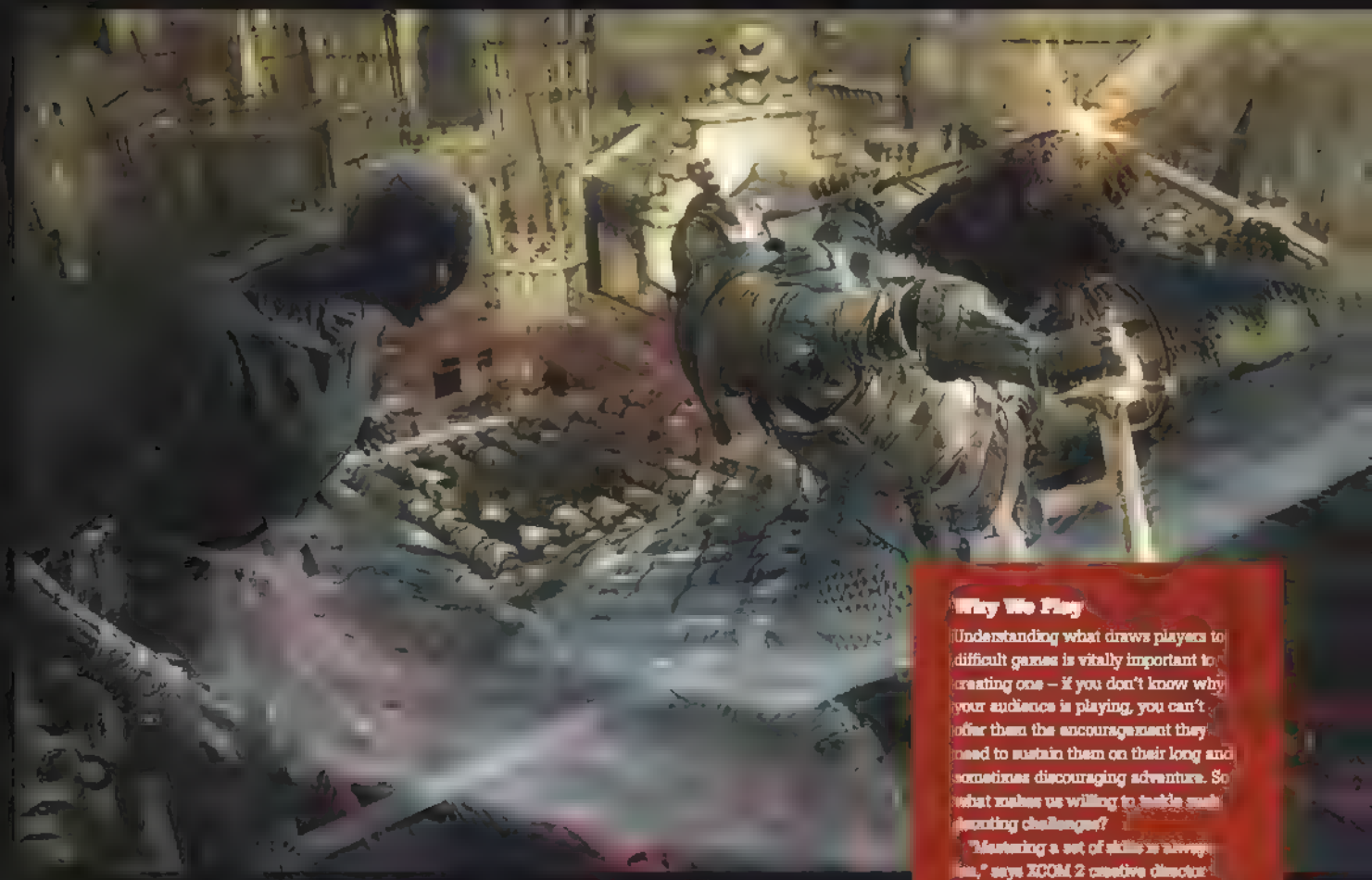
KEEPING FRUSTRATION AT BAY

Continually getting bested by a particular challenge can be a frustrating and game-ending experience. So how do developers prevent players from throwing their controller at a wall? The most important factor for mitigating frustration is fostering the sense that every success and failure is earned by the player. "It's my job as a designer to promote fairness, to make sure that the rules of a game are transmitted clearly," says XCOM 2 creative director Jake Solomon. "...I mean fairness in the sense that when things happen, the player understands why, and how those things fit into the overall rules." Losing a beloved veteran soldier to a rampaging Muton Berserker in XCOM can be devastating, but it's also the direct result of your own choices – where you moved your characters, which enemies you targeted, etc. In other words, you may get frustrated with yourself, but not the game.

Diablo III lead designer Kevin Martens points to another vital component: player choice. "When a game gets difficult, there should be something that the player can learn or choose to do differently to overcome the difficulty," Martens says. Diablo III plies players with endless loot, weapons, and a variety of powerful abilities to overcome obstacles in the method of their choosing. If the player is still hitting a wall, they can also simply choose another activity such as Adventure mode or a tackling Greater Rift.

Darkest Dungeon provides a unique case study. Its roguelike nature and sheer amount of variance can lead to situations where the odds are severely stacked against the player. The solution? Give players a way out. "Without the ability to retreat, the player would feel at times that there is nothing they can do to overcome a bad deal of cards," says Darkest Dungeon design director Tyler Sigman. "It would be like forcing players to bet on a weak hand. We are every bit as interested in what you do when things are going poorly as when all is going great." The ability to retreat from fights and abandon quests doesn't just create an enticing risk/reward to mull over – it once again puts the onus on the player. If you push too hard and get your entire party killed by a ghoulish necromancer, their blood is on your hands, not the game's design.

Another important key to minimizing frustration is making sure the hard-won victories feel worth the effort. "I think the key as a developer when making challenging games is aligning your rewards with the player's moments of triumph," Solomon says. "Beat a particularly tough enemy? Have a huge rewarding kill sequence and earn a really fun new item. Solve a particularly tough puzzle? Have a great unlock animation or a satisfying reward." Oftentimes the sense of accomplishment when overcoming a difficult challenge is a reward in its own right – but throwing in some sparkly new loot on top of the victory never hurts.



Why We Play

Understanding what draws players to difficult games is vitally important to creating one – if you don't know why your audience is playing, you can't offer them the encouragement they need to sustain them on their long and sometimes discouraging adventure. So what makes us willing to tackle such daunting challenges?

"Mastering a set of skills is always fun," says XCOM 2 creative director Jake Solomon. "The process of learning is fun, and the process of applying your learning is even more fun. Everybody likes to feel clever, and with challenging games, your reward is really that sense of cleverness, that sense of accomplishment in the face of obstacles. Whether you're mulling over your next move in a turn-based strategy game, dodging sword strikes in an action RPG, or timing precise jumps in a 2D platformer, acquiring and perfecting your skills is always rewarding."

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

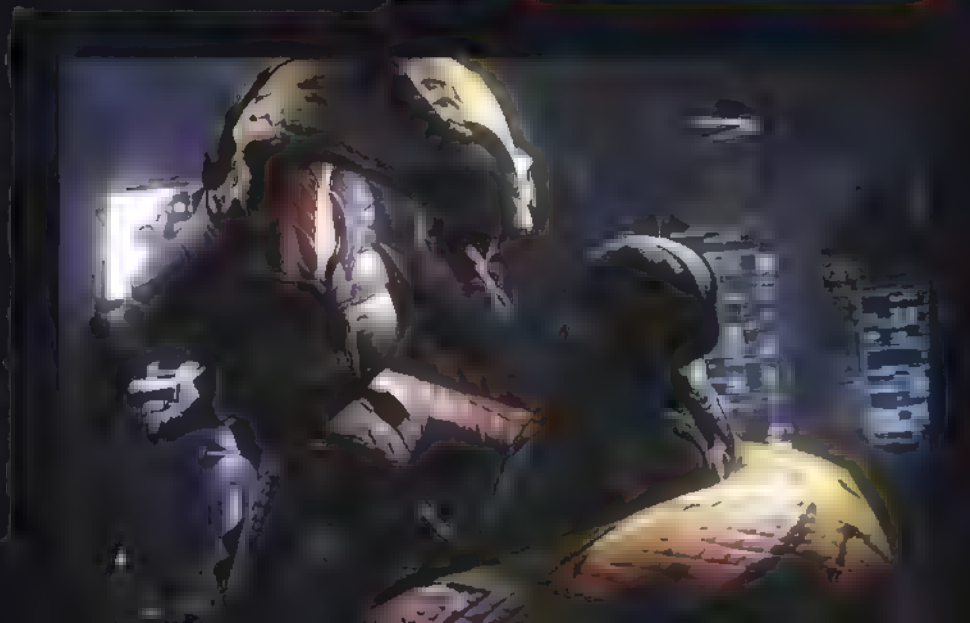
Just because a game is meant to be hard doesn't mean the designer can throw difficulty balancing out the window. In fact, attaining the right degree of challenge is even more important and harder to achieve than with less demanding games. Once again, designers employ a variety of tactics to achieve the right kind of difficulty.

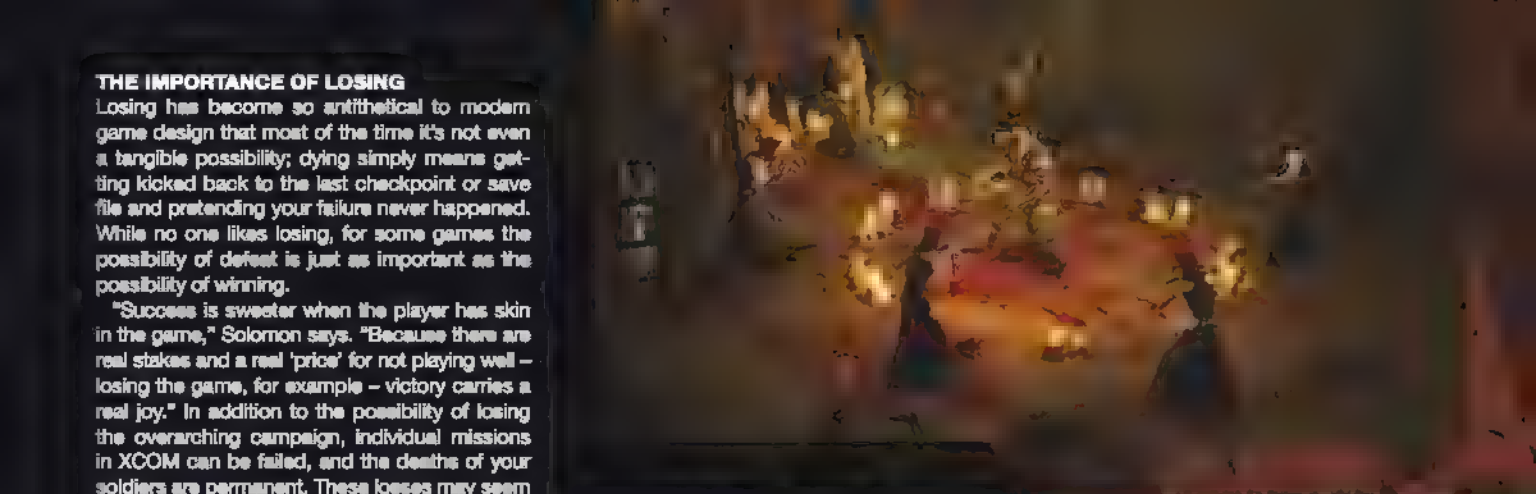
When balancing Super Meat Boy, designer Edmund McMillen's approach was characteristically straightforward, but nonetheless impressive. "I just played it," McMillen says, "and if I could beat the levels and I wasn't frustrated, I would move on to the next one....So I was kind of the par, I guess; if I could do it without much frustration, then I knew it wasn't going to frustrate most gamers."

For many designers, their instincts are only the beginning of the balancing process. "I always start with my personal experience, and as soon as I can, I start playing the game and then realize how insane my initial guesses were," Solomon says. Once Firaxis hones the difficulty through repeated play, it turns to focus tests for additional feedback. "[Outside input] is always great at opening your eyes to problems you might have grown used to over the course of a project's development, or just didn't see with your developer blinders on."

The Diablo III team follows a similar path. "We play all of the classes on a regular basis to gut-check the difficulty," Martens says. "But a huge amount of the balance comes from both community feedback and game data. We get people's thoughts on the state of the balance, as well as run lots of reports to identify what builds are being played, what monsters are killing people, etc. Balance is both an art and a science."

Many developers are no longer waiting for launch to start collecting feedback from fans. "The biggest lesson we've learned is that large-scale public betas are integral to making a game of this level of complexity," Martens says. "In retrospect, we wish we had done that for the initial Diablo III launch. There is no substitute for thousands of players doing everything they can to dominate the monsters and challenges in their game to teach us what is most fun about those things."





THE IMPORTANCE OF LOSING

Losing has become so antithetical to modern game design that most of the time it's not even a tangible possibility; dying simply means getting kicked back to the last checkpoint or save file and pretending your failure never happened. While no one likes losing, for some games the possibility of defeat is just as important as the possibility of winning.

"Success is sweeter when the player has skin in the game," Solomon says. "Because there are real stakes and a real 'price' for not playing well – losing the game, for example – victory carries a real joy." In addition to the possibility of losing the overarching campaign, individual missions in XCOM can be failed, and the deaths of your soldiers are permanent. These losses may seem harsh when they happen, but they help build up to a greater sense of achievement. "Succeeding in XCOM, or any game with a lose condition, feels authentic – or actually, it is authentic," Solomon says. "You are risking something, so you are actually gaining something when you win."

The potential – and sometimes all-out likelihood – to fail is also vital for setting Darkest Dungeon's ruthless tone. Like in XCOM, permadeath ensures your adventurers in Darkest Dungeon feel more personal. "[Permadeath] heightens tension by creating meaningful consequences for your decisions," Sigman says. "It also deepens the emergent narrative and emotional investment in the heroes themselves."

Both Darkest Dungeon and XCOM (when played in Iron Man mode) remove the ability to manually save your game, further forcing you to own your decisions. "The risk of death and loss gives more gravitas to every experience they have," Sigman says. "A resisted deathblow now becomes a truly heroic moment instead of just a determiner of whether you reload the battle." Normally players would gripe about such an "archaic" approach to saving progress, but for Darkest Dungeon and XCOM the method doesn't just work – fans consider it the "authentic" way to play.

The stakes are equally high in Dark Souls; every death threatens to rob the player of their souls, the currency used for purchasing weapons, life-saving armor and items, and leveling up your character. This sense of difficulty isn't just integral to the experience, it is the experience. "For me, difficulty is a tool to express the challenge in the game, and the overcoming of the challenge is what we want the player to experience," says director Hidetaka Miyazaki. "I want to have the game be worth something, and one of those elements is the satisfaction of overcoming the challenges." The added hardships makes winning all the more rewarding – if you win.

THERE IS NO SILVER BULLET

The save systems of Darkest Dungeon and XCOM underline an important – and perhaps the only – universal truth we learned while talking to designers: Every game is a unique and independent case. "There is no right answer to how to design difficulty," Martens says. "Even across the Diablo games, different approaches have been taken on each of the different games.... I think the game's intentions and fun should define what difficulty approach is best."

Despite the shared desire to make challenging games, every designer we spoke with has walked a distinct path to reach their goal. Some are uncompromising in their approach, relying on their personal instincts and vision to shape the adventure. Others scour through reams of data and player feedback to strike the right balance. No single approach will satisfy everyone. Balancing a difficult game is even more grueling than playing it, but the rewards are equally satisfying.

More Ways To Fix Frustration

Alleviating player frustration is vital to game design – especially when a high degree of challenge is present. Here are a few more tricks designers use to reduce rage quits without making things easier.

Cut out the return times: Minimizing the length of death animations, game over screens, load times, and distance between checkpoints ensures players can focus on overcoming the challenge, not getting back to it.

Failure isn't final: Fail states allow players to fail a specific encounter and continue on with the adventure. Not only do they add more weight to challenges, they also encourage additional playthroughs.

Keep player progression: Allowing items, XP, and/or currency to carry over after death ensures no attempt at a challenge feels like a complete waste of time. The same is true for meta progression.

Change things up: Roguelikes keep repeated playthroughs engaging by randomizing environments, enemies, and objectives. Even when an adventure ends in death, jumping back in feels fun and fresh.

Make it optional: Some games let players bypass extreme challenges completely by presenting them as side content or only requiring a certain percentage of levels or objectives to be completed before progressing.

Quotable

"It's gold. And it's something we're spending a lot of time looking at, pouring through, discussing, and we may very well develop those things further. We definitely want to."

LucasArts head Kathleen Kennedy on possibly using the canceled Star Wars 1313 in an interview with *Slashfilm*.

The Good

SYSTEM SHOCK 3

is coming courtesy of a partnership between Night Dive Studios and Otherside Entertainment. We don't have a lot of details, but the companies say the project is in the "early concept stages of development." The game features talent from the original game, including Shodan's voice actor Terri Brosius.

The Bad

UBISOFT

has had bad luck with betas recently. The open beta for Rainbow Six Siege was less than a week before the game's release, and even that was postponed a day due to technical issues. The beta for The Division (shown) has been postponed until early 2016 (although those who preordered the title on Xbox One can participate in the closed alpha). Given how some games – including Ubisoft's own Assassin's Creed Unity last year – had trouble at launch, skimping on these pre-release public testing periods doesn't seem like the best idea.

The Ugly

VALVE SAYS

that over 77,000 Steam accounts are hijacked each month. A common practice with the hijacked accounts is the selling of virtual goods from the account and using the accounts as clearing houses for other items. The company says it has new methods to combat the practices.

THEIR TIME IS NOW
DC's
LEGENDS
OF TOMORROW
SERIES PREMIERE JAN 21 THUR 8/7c
THE CW
DARE TO DEFY

PSX Revels In Indie Creativity

Since the launch of the PS4, Sony has been a hotbed for indie game releases, and that trend doesn't look to be changing. This message was loud and clear at this year's PlayStation Experience conference, where we saw a host of strong indies on the horizon. We've highlighted our favorites below, regardless of whether they're Sony exclusives or they're targeting broader platform releases.

While there's no shortage of Metroid-inspired platformers on the horizon, We The Force Studios' **Randall** is adding its own flavor by letting you take control of enemies (including bosses) and use their abilities to navigate a dystopian world. Your main character, Randall, isn't a cookie-cutter save-the-world protagonist, either. He's a telepath with schizophrenia, unsure if he can trust the voices in his head guiding him. Throw in the fact that he lives in a society that's under strict surveillance by a malicious dictator and he's got a lot of turmoil on his plate.

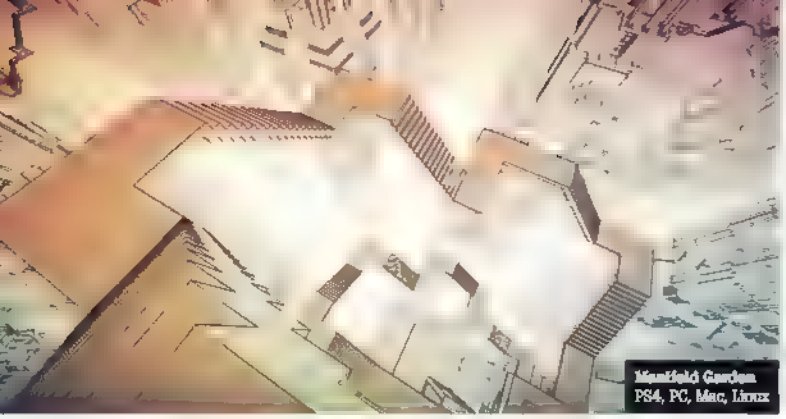
The platforming is tight, fast, and reminiscent of Super Meat Boy, but you're not constantly jumping your way through the landscape. The game also has a basic combat system and provides plenty of opportunities to experiment with Randall's cool ability to take control of baddies, using them to get you around levels. For instance, you can toss an enemy on spikes and then jump on him en route to the next platform. You also earn any extra skills your foe has when you mount it, giving you abilities like flight and deadly lasers. Randall is due out sometime this year on PlayStation 4, Vita, and PC.

Plastic, best known for Datura, recently announced its new project **Bound**, and it was turning heads at PSX. In this artistic platformer, you play as a princess who needs to defeat a monster destroying her world. As you look for ways to confront it, the world is falling apart. To get through its various obstacles, you perform ballet, plié-ing through landscapes and using pointe work to get across narrow beams. Classical music paints each scene, but so do the princess's movements, which are just as intense and deliberate. The visuals reflect modern art and were inspired by Suprematism, Concretism, Neoplasticism, and Bauhaus.

From our brief demo, we believe this experimental journey will defy your expectations of a game. The platforming is minor, and Bound is more about the experience than mastering any gameplay systems. Creator Michal Staniszewski wrote on the PlayStation Blog, "Bound is a 3D platformer designed for people with the desire to concentrate on the narrative side of games and experience a mature story." However, he was also quick to throw a curveball by stating, "On the other side of the spectrum, Bound is also being prepared for hardcore gamers looking for the challenge of one big puzzle that can be only solved by a community of players working together." Time will tell what that entails, but it sounds intriguing. Bound is set to release this year on PlayStation 4.

Zeboyd Games has brought us interesting, smaller RPGs such as Cthulhu Saves the World and two episodes of Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness, but **Cosmic Star Heroine** is its most ambitious game yet. This was our second time seeing the game in action and it continues to be exciting. Cosmic Star Heroine captures the essence of many 16-bit era JRPGs, such as Phantasy Star and Lunar, but it also draws inspiration from sci-fi films, such as *Blade Runner* and *Alien*. The story follows Alyssa L'Sale, who uncovers a government conspiracy. The government fires back by outing the legendary spy to the public, meaning every enemy now has her on their radar.

The turn-based battle system is most impressive. While this type of RPG system has faded away over time due to lack of innovation, Zeboyd Games has figured out a way to make it fun again. The battle system allows you to tap into a number of strategies and not just button mash "attack" to victory. Some attacks can only be used once, unless you take a turn to recharge them. This forces you to experiment a bit with buffing characters or making the most of their special skills. For instance, one character has a skill called "echo" and a highly powerful attack. Every time I used the potent skill, I activated "echo" to use it again next turn without having to recharge it. Exploiting little things like that makes the system extremely satisfying. Every character has a unique arsenal of skills and you can recruit up to 11 characters to battle beside you. If you're looking for



Manifold Garden
PS4, PC, Mac, Linux

Chasm
PS4, PC

the classic RPG experience but don't want to deal with archaic design, keep an eye on Cosmic Star Heroine, which is coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, and Vita this spring.

It's impossible not to spot the Castlevania inspiration in **Chasm**, a retro-inspired dungeon exploration game that procedurally generates as you play through it. The combat, platforming, and exploration elements all feel familiar to the classic Castlevania title, Symphony of the Night, and the art style is also reminiscent of that time period.

Despite these obvious inspirations – which the team from Discord Games doesn't try to hide – Chasm is very much its own entry into the genre. The dungeons the protagonist Daltyn encounter are procedurally generated, but not the rooms themselves. Rather than relying on the engine to build the rooms, the team hand-crafted each room individually, then let the engine procedurally generate the way they appear to players. This way, the rooms feel intentional in how they are designed while still providing a different experience for each player. Over the course of a typical playthrough, the team tells us you experience approximately 70-percent of the handcrafted rooms, giving the game greater replay value. Watch for a release on PS4 and PC later this year.

In **Stories: The Path of Destinies**, you take control of the roguishly daring protagonist Reynardo the Fox, and head out on a branching quest to rebel against the Emperor and win the war he's become caught up in. The isometric top-down gameplay gives it a vibe that is commonly associated with retro Zelda titles, but the smooth combat mechanics feel more reminiscent of combo-focused action games like Assassin's Creed. Players can also upgrade Reynardo's abilities and his weapons through items found exploring the levels.

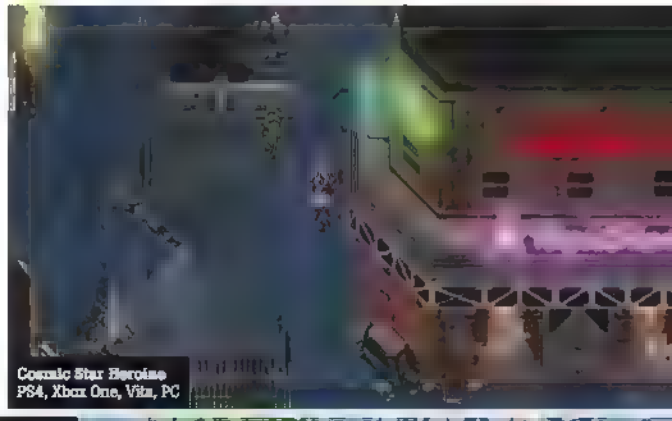
Along the way, Spearhead Games enables players to help craft the narrative by making decisions on the direction Reynardo takes in his journey. One such decision made us choose between rescuing an old friend or pursuing a powerful weapon that could wipe out the rival army. Choosing the former caused our next level to be in a bright and colorful town with lots of areas to explore while choosing the latter sent Reynardo into a dark dungeon that features lots of battles and some stealth sequences.

Stories: The Path of Destinies is also gorgeous, making it stand out from the crowd even more. We can't wait to play more when it launches early this year on PS4.

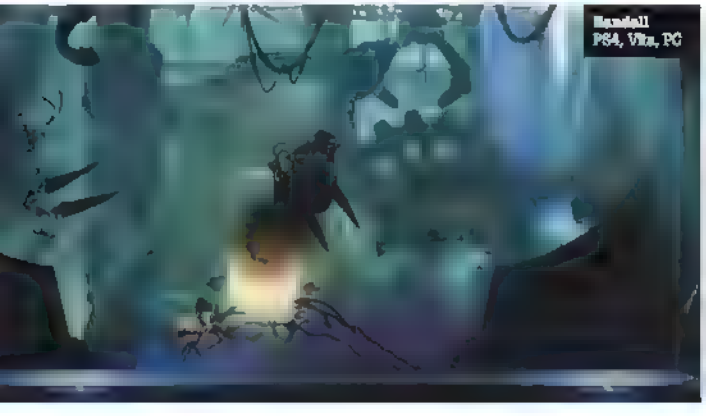
From developer William Chyr comes **Manifold Garden**, a first-person puzzler that puts the power of gravity in the palm of your hand. Using the ability to change which direction gravity flows, you must make your way through an increasingly challenging world full of puzzles. As you shift the gravitational pull to one wall, everything in the room of the same color shifts with you, leaving everything else unaffected. Because of this, you need to retrain your brain to think about how different groupings of items are affected by these rules as you try and reach new platforms and throw switches that open specific doors.

The demo we played started out simple enough, but by the end, we were wondering how we would ever solve the challenges laid before us. Thankfully, Manifold Garden possesses moments of frustrating hopelessness followed by relieving realizations. Much like Portal, the mind-bending puzzles of Manifold Garden are designed to take you right to your breaking point before it all starts to make sense. Chyr is planning to release Manifold Garden this year on PS4, PC, Mac, and Linux.

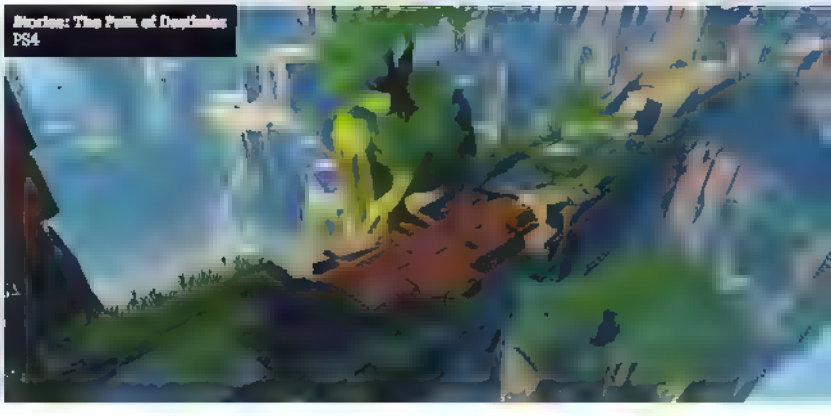
As avid fans of well-designed first-person puzzle games, Manifold Garden has our full attention. The minimalist visual style furthers the personality and helps set it apart as one of the more artistic-looking indie games we've seen in some time.



Cosmic Star Heroine
PS4, Xbox One, Vita, PC



Rendell
PS4, Vita, PC



Stories: The Path of Destinies
PS4

Making Games Personal

After turning heads with a little Flash game, How Do You Do It?, Nina Freeman has kept tackling offbeat topics. She recently joined Fullbright (Gone Home) and launched a unique game called Cibele, exploring an Internet relationship. We spoke with Freeman about her different approach to games and future endeavors.

What are some of your personal goals as a designer?
In the broadest sense, I'm really interested in making games about characters, games that focus on personalities and expressing them through the mechanics, and telling these interesting stories about individuals, especially ordinary people. I'm interested in telling those types of stories through player/character embodiment, where I design the mechanics and context to help players perform that role as a way of understanding it.

What are some challenges of putting yourself in your own work and having to step back and examine your life in such an honest way?
It's been an interesting challenge for me because there's this cultural taboo about oversharing. Everyone's always like, "TMI, TMI!" And I grew up in a family where it was especially taboo to talk about yourself. I think not being encouraged to share my feelings made me want to do it even more. As I got

older, I just naturally started gravitating toward using writing as way to express my feelings. I think I've just been doing that for so long that it's just the type of work I'm attracted to. Writing like this has helped me overcome some personal issues, but also is a type of storytelling I think should be explored deeper than it already is in games, specifically because it's already been a powerful form in other media. I want to harness that in games.

What are some games that have inspired your work?
The ones I always cite – actually I work with them now so it feels kind of biased – but honestly Gone Home had a huge impact on me. So did Dysphoria, Kentucky Route Zero, and Cart Life. These were all games coming out around the time I started and opened my eyes to experimental things that I hadn't really encountered before. I guess even before that I've been obsessed with Final Fantasy for so long. That's kind of a big inspiration because Final Fantasy games deal so heavily with story and individual characters. Obviously, poetry is also a huge inspiration – specifically The New York School. Also, Sophia Coppola's movies, those have had a really big impact on me, especially for Cibele. There are actually shots in Cibele that are basically just inspired from shots in Sophia Coppola's movies.

Your work as "games" have sometimes been called into question. Does that bother you or is that distinction even important?
I think more for any kind of cultural expectation. Those kind of things have a lot of power. When people say my games aren't games I get disappointed, but I'm also encouraged because I feel like that cultural expectation is not going to change unless people actively challenge it. The thing that drives me to makes games isn't to challenge that expectation; I want to just to tell stories, but it does feel good to know I can do what I love while challenging these expectations. I'm sure there are a lot of people that feel tied down by those expectations, and I hope they can see the stuff I'm doing and think, "Oh, maybe I should start thinking about this a little differently." I think that's the best way to help culture and the medium itself grow, evolve, and be interesting.

There's been a movement toward more autobiographical games, such as The Beginner's Guide and your own, Cibele. Do you think this trend will continue in the future?
Yeah, I think so. Games are really, really good at helping people perform as other characters. You interact with games and you are engaging with these mechanics and ultimately performing them. I figure, why not take advantage of that performative aspect in games and use it to perform characters? I think on top of that people naturally – no matter how times people like to call me or anyone else creating personal games a narcissist – like to talk about themselves. Whether they say it or not, people put themselves in their stories because they can only write from their own perspective. I think that as people see others like myself or Davey (Wreden) embracing [this] they might recognize they've been doing that all along. They just haven't been talking about it.

Why do you think video games have had such a hard time tackling sex in a mature way?
There's a cultural stigma around talking about sex that stretches well beyond games. I mean you see movies, women are underrepresented, you see games and they're even more underrepresented. You see these same patterns emerging in all forms of media and that really stems from American culture, where you just don't really talk about sex. I mean, I grew up and my parents didn't even have the sex talk with me. I encountered an extreme form of that stigma, but ultimately I think we're living in a time where people are starting to talk about it a lot more openly. I think games have just developed that stigma along with the rest of culture, but as it becomes more open, you'll see more [conversation] about it in an honest way like I've been trying to do, like Cara Ellison's Sacrilege or Merritt Kopas' work. So it's cool to see that games about sex are being talked about instead of pushed to the side as "too weird" or "too inappropriate."

Your best known games are about sex. Do you worry about that topic defining your work?
It's been interesting to see actually, because I've made games about things other than sex. I guess How Do You Do It? was really the game that put me on the map as a designer and those were all before that. To a certain extent, I think people will always ask me about sex in games, but since I often draw on my own personal life there is a limit to how many sex stories I can come up with [laughs] I think as I keep doing stuff I'll inevitably start addressing other topics. I just find sex and sexuality to be interesting, so I just like making games about it at the moment. But even when I was doing poetry, I tended to be the type of person who likes to focus on a theme as concisely as possible. It's a phase and then I'll find another theme that I find exciting. My work has always taken that kind of pattern, so I don't know what I'll explore next, but I'm not sure that I'm done with sex yet. I know eventually I'll get sick of it.

Name some games you feel are underappreciated.
Plug-and-play is a really cool mobile game that I don't even know if I can do justice describing it. It's about all these weird, featureless little black-and-white figures and it has this heartwarming abstract story about love and friendship. But the entire mechanic is dragging around these little plugs and plugging them into different things, whether it's one of these little figures' butts or like a wall. Also, Robert Yang's games. He's a designer I knew in New York and he focuses on games about gay sex and being a gay man. He made a game all about taking d--- pics and it has this sophisticated system where you can customize your penis. Even stuff that might be more mainstream like the Love Live game I've been obsessed with. It's this cute little anime/rhythm game and the game itself isn't that interesting but kind of the culture that's formed around it is really fascinating.

What advice would give to people who are getting into the industry?
My advice is to make as many games as possible as quickly as possible. I was going to game jams frequently that first year I was making games. I think when you start working with a new medium you are immediately up against your own internal expectations. When you make small things really fast, you start to dig away and find the actual interesting ideas. Just stay committed.

What can we expect from you in the future?
Right now I'm working on Tacoma as a level designer. In the past I've done a lot of 2D tiny games, like Cibele and How Do You Do It? I still plan on doing more of those. Recently, I did a commission for this game that's not out yet, but will be soon called Bum Rush. It's a car combat/dating sim/racing game, where you play one of eight college roommates who all have a sexy date on the same night and they all want to use the room for sex, but they can't decide who gets to use it so they decide to basically race for it. In the future, I'm interested in doing more different kinds of games and seeing how to tell stories in different kinds ways.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2012
Freeman creates her first game based on a sci-fi poem she wrote using Python. It remains unreleased

2013
Releases her first playable game online called Dating Sim. Freeman also graduates with an Integrated Digital Media MS from New York University

2014
Develops How Do You Do It? with Emmett Butler, Joni Kittaka, and Decky Coss at Global Game Jam. It goes on to be nominated for IGF's Nuovo Award

2015
Creates the autobiographical game Freshman Year with Laura Knetzger and Stephen Lawrence Clark about a night out at a party, tackling the subject of abuse

2015
Moves to Portland, Oregon to accept a job with Fullbright to work as a level designer on the upcoming first-person exploration game Tacoma

2015
Launches Cibele, a game that explores sex, love, and online dating, with StarMaid Games. It goes on to become a highly talked about game in the press

ORIGIN PC Omega

Valve created a lot of buzz when it first announced its "invasion" of the living room with the Steam Machine. Unfortunately, that assault turned into a minor incursion as Steam OS consoles have failed to impress. However, boutique PC manufacturer Origin thinks it has a better way to bring PC games to your living room TV.

The Origin Omega is a traditional Windows-driven PC that boots immediately into Steam's Big Picture mode. This gives the Omega many of the advantages of a Steam Machine without the limitations associated with a less-popular operating system.

This bulky black box is a little big for a video game console (even bigger than the original Xbox), but the system still feels trim for a PC tower. Our build housed an Intel Core i7 6700 and a liquid-cooled Nvidia GeForce GTX Titan X, which ran high-end titles like The Witcher III: Wild Hunt and Grand Theft Auto V on high settings without a stutter.

Unfortunately, the Omega's specialized internal design makes it harder to upgrade, and visually the Omega lacks the sleek industrial design of the Xbox One or PlayStation 4. If you want true console emulation, you'll also need to buy a controller, or at least a wireless mouse and keyboard, all of which are sold separately.

TV-ready PCs are an odd market that hasn't really been cracked open yet, which might be due to the fact that it's relatively easy to build your own living-room PC for a lot less money. However, if you're intimidated by the thought of assembling your own gaming rig, it's hard to argue with the Omega's performance.

Starting at $1,256
(Our configuration: $3,077) | *originpc.com*

by Ben Reeves

1 Samsung Gear VR

Commercial virtual reality released earlier than expected thanks to the Samsung Gear VR. The smartphone giant has teamed up with Oculus to deliver a portable VR experience that is a nice taste of things to come, but it isn't without its flaws. The headset only works if you have a Galaxy Note 5, Galaxy S6, S6 edge, or S6 edge+ smartphone to plug into it, and the software library is still somewhat experimental. That said, there are already a few great titles that make use of the technology, such as Temple Run VR, Land's End, Gunjack, and Anshar Wars 2. Of course, VR is still a pioneering technology, so you'll have to put up with a slightly pixelated display that trims out your peripheral vision. We found the headset to be comfortable even after wearing it for nearly an hour, but we did experience some virtual drift that required us to re-center our display periodically. If you already own a Samsung phone this is a fun toy, but everyone else should wait for VR's official launch party.

AVERAGE

$99.99 | *samsung.com*

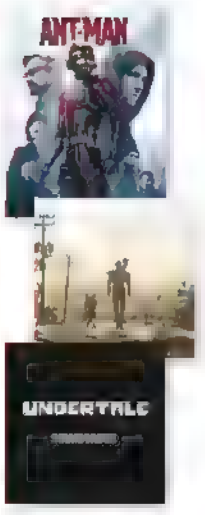
2 Analogue Nt Console

Many modern retro consoles feel like they're manufactured at absolute minimal cost. The Analogue Nt is the antithesis of those thrifty options. This device contains the refurbished chipsets from the original Nintendo and Famicom systems, which are securely encased in a custom-cut case of solid aluminum. The end result is a system with satisfying weight that's cool to the touch, and probably the most reliable way to play NES games without fixing an old unit yourself. Even better, a $79 upgrade integrates native HDMI output without any input lag or signal degradation issues. The Analogue Nt comes at a premium, so only discerning fans of old-school games (with disposable income) need apply.

VERY GOOD

$499 | *analogue.co*

Media Shelf



ANT-MAN

Marvel's string of theatrical successes continues in this delightful tale about a thief named Scott Lang who must find the little hero inside himself to protect a powerful scientific secret from falling into the wrong hands.

$29.95
marvel.com/antman

FALLOUT 3 SPECIAL EDITION VINYL SOUNDTRACK

With over 80 minutes of audio, this full 29-track score by Inon Zur (Dragon Age: Origins, Prince of Persia) comes packaged across three LPs and is fitted into in a heavy board slipcover. This package is so massive it's the equivalent of one of Bethesda's games.

$85.00
store.bethsoft.com

UNDERTALE SOUNDTRACK

Even if Undertale's visuals were a little bland, its music left us dizzy with delight. The soundtrack to Toby Fox's runaway indie hit is a dream mix of chiptune and 8-bit midi effects you can't stop humming.

$9.99
tobyfox.bandcamp.com

When Non-Lethal Tactics Become More Fun Than Killing

by Tim Turi, Features Editor

Blasting my first imp to bloody bits in Doom during the early '90s helped mold me into an unapologetic gorehound. Since then, video games like Mortal Kombat X and Fallout 4 have kept up their end of the bargain to deliver violent, over-the-top kills that are often equal parts grotesque and amusing. Despite video games' penchant for brutal violence, I noticed an uncharacteristic trend in the way I played some of my favorite games this year. Non-lethality was the more fun, more beneficial way to play when given the option.

Video games offering players the choice in whether to spare or kill their enemies isn't a new concept. In games like Infamous or the first Metal Gear Solid, morality was left up to a binary, black and white decision or divorced from moment-to-moment gameplay by influencing an end-game score, respectively.

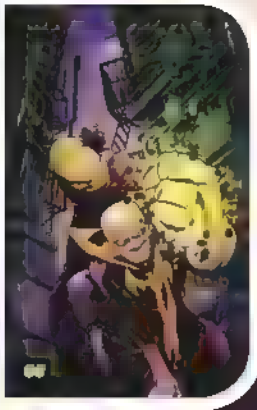
Unlike that previous trend, some of this year's best games more elegantly weaved players' agency for non-lethality into the core gameplay. For example, the 3DS game Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate is all about bashing and hacking at gigantic beasts, but players can choose to trap their prey instead of simply killing it. Deal enough damage to a raging Rathalos and it might begin to drool and limp away toward its den. A savvy hunter will know to track it down, lay a net next to where it sleeps, and then pelt it with tranquilizer bombs when it's ensnared. Successfully capturing a monster not only feels more sporting than bashing a wounded animal to death, it also earns you more resources for crafting (how our hunters acquire the monster's scales and other goodies is left up to the player's imagination).

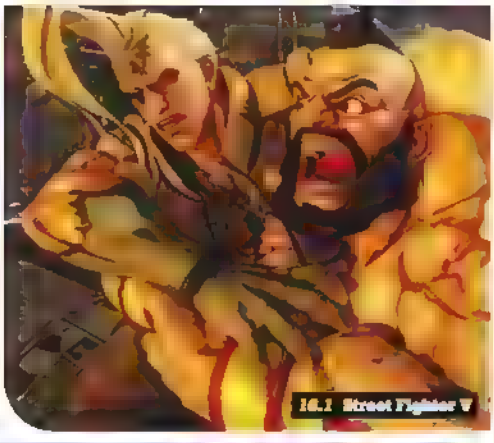
The indie hit Undertale is another game with nonviolent themes intrinsically attached to its story and gameplay. Inspired by JRPG classics like EarthBound and Chrono Trigger, the game draws on players' instinctual urge to kill every creature they encounter to earn experience and make their stats go up. Just a few kills into Undertale and I felt oddly dirty, and my gut feelings proved correct. Every encounter has a nonviolent, oftentimes ludicrous solution as well, like petting a dog warrior until he's too overcome by joy to fight. The game changes depending on whether you kill or spare more creatures, affecting how key characters interact with you, the tone of certain areas, and even the ending. To see Undertale's most complete and fascinating conclusion you need to be a pacifist. More succinctly, killing enemies in Undertale is comparatively flat-out boring.

One of this year's most popular games, Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain, stars Big Boss as one of the most legendary soldiers who has ever lived. But instead of murdering hundreds, players are encouraged to spread his legacy and influence by capturing skilled enemies on the battlefield and sending them to your base. The gameplay loop quickly becomes identifying potentially helpful personnel, shooting them with a tranquilizer gun, and then attaching a Fulton balloon to them for exfiltration. Building up Mother Base is crucial for developing new weapons, gear upgrades, and advancing the story. I became so invested in acquiring new recruits and clearing hostile territory with balloon kidnapping that I felt guilt ridden anytime I botched a mission so irredeemably that I was forced to kill. Potential allies died because I got sloppy.

I don't want every video game to have a hippy dippy, flowers-in-gun-barrels solution to every combat encounter, but I think this year was successful in marrying gameplay agency with narrative themes. More often than not, doing the "right thing" in life is the more difficult-yet-rewarding route, and it makes sense for games to shine brightest and make it worth our while when doing so. ◆

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer.





timeline

2016

February

01 New Releases
› Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth *(PS4, Vita)*

03 The Coming of the Supermen
Harking back to the *Death and Return of Superman* days, Metropolis' skyline will once again be filled with red and blue spandex. In today's release, *The Coming of the Supermen*, DC is revealing three new characters, all with the same strength and skill set as Superman. Odds are this scenario doesn't end well.

05 New Releases
› XCOM 2 *(PC)*

09 Power Man and Iron Fist
If you watched Netflix's *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* shows and want to know what comes next, pick up Marvel's two newest series, *Luke Cage* and *Iron Fist*, launching today. Netflix is adapting both of these characters into shows, and we've already seen Power Man (Luke Cage) in *Jessica Jones*.

09 New Releases
› Alekhine's Gun *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Arslan: The Warriors of Legend *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3)*
› Firewatch *(PS4, PC, Mac, Linux)*
› Gravity Rush Remastered *(PS4)*
› Mighty No. 9 *(PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, 3DS, Vita, PC, Mac, Linux)*
› Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4 *(PS3, Xbox One, PC)*

12 Deadpool & Zoolander No. 2
If you like comic books and are a fan of the only Ben Stiller movie worth watching, today isn't a bad day to spend at the movies. *Deadpool* and *Zoolander No. 2* both open, and should deliver plenty of laughs ...most for the right reasons, we're hoping!

16.1 New Releases
› Project X Zone 2 *(3DS)*
› Street Fighter V *(PS4, PC)*

16.2 D.I.C.E. Summit 2016
Todd Howard, Sid Meier, and dozens of well-respected game developers descend upon Las Vegas' Mandalay Bay casino today to talk about the future of video games. This three-day event includes speakers and roundtables, and concludes with the 18th annual D.I.C.E. Awards ceremony hosted by comedian Pete Holmes.

17 Lara Croft's Adventure Continues
Dark Horse Comics' long-running Tomb Raider series jumps beyond the games today with a story that picks up after Rise of the Tomb Raider's events.

19 New Releases
› Fire Emblem Fates: Birthright *(3DS)*
› Fire Emblem Fates: Conquest *(3DS)*

23 New Releases
› Far Cry Primal *(PS4, Xbox One)*
› Dead or Alive Xtreme 3 *(PS4, Vita)*
› Mega Man Legacy Collection *(3DS)*
› Plants vs. Zombies Garden Warfare 2 *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness *(PS4)*

27 New Releases
› Pokémon Red/Blue/Yellow *(3DS eShop)*

PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC
STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(12-Player Online)
PUBLISHER
Bethesda
DEVELOPER
id Software,
Certain Affinity,
Escalation
RELEASE
Spring
A LEGEND

BY MATT BERTZ

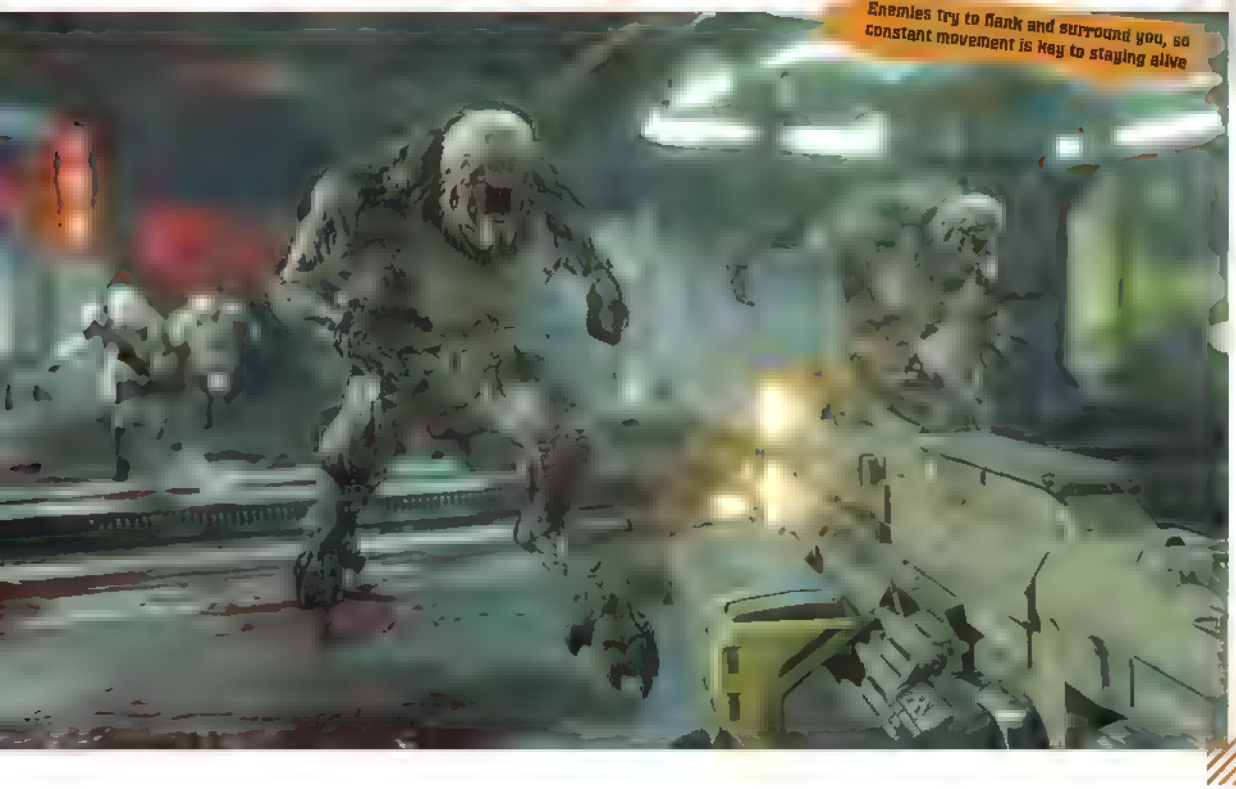
A decade is an eternity in technology. When Doom 3 released in 2004, Twitter didn't exist, there were no YouTube celebrities, and Apple had yet to invent the iPhone. In the 11 years since, Activision has released 19 Call of Duty games, the motion-gaming fad has come and gone, and console dominance has shifted from PlayStation to Xbox and back to PlayStation again. But some things are timeless, and regardless of era, seem comfortable in their own skin. Count Doom among those rarities.

The first-person shooter credited for popularizing the genre, Doom introduced many gamers to shareware, 3D environments, modding, and multiplayer deathmatches when it released in 1993. The breakneck pace of its combat, the colorful enemies, and explosive gunplay all left an indelible impression on gamers, becoming so popular that it was estimated to be installed on more computers than the Windows 95 operating system in late 1995. Mothers and politicians raged against the ultraviolence, yet the game's allure was undeniable. But with only three numbered entries in the 22 years since its debut, it holds a unique position in the genre it started. Few first-person shooters today play like Doom, having grown in new directions by introducing more tactical gameplay, creating open worlds, or focusing solely on multiplayer.

As we sit down in the new Richardson, Texas headquarters of id Software, it's clear much has changed at the studio in the last 11 years as well. The fiercely independent company joined the Bethesda family in 2009. Legendary programmer John Carmack joined fellow founders John Romero, Tom Hall, and Adrian Carmack among the ranks of id alumni, leaving the studio to pursue his interest in virtual reality technology by joining Oculus.

While the founders may be gone, Doom still carries forward. After playing extended sessions of the rebuilt single-player and multiplayer, it's clear this game preserves all the signature elements of the original, while modernizing the long-dormant franchise with best-in-class graphics and a new user-generated content system unlike anything the studio has attempted before.

Doom is back, and after 11 years away, it looks poised to shake up the first-person shooter scene it put on the map.



Enemies try to flank and surround you, so constant movement is key to staying alive

JUMPING BACK INTO THE FRAY

When a game franchise takes this long between releases, the first question that naturally arises is, "What took so long?" With Doom, it's complicated.

In the years after Doom 3 launched to strong sales and critical acclaim, id Software began working on the follow-up while also creating a new game called Rage. Once Rage shipped in 2011, the company focus shifted back to its most renowned franchise. But development had its hiccups, and when the studio took a step back two years later, it realized the game just "wasn't Doom enough." Rather than resuscitate the project, id and Bethesda agreed to scrap it altogether and start anew.

The reboot began in earnest in 2013 with a team led by Marty Stratton, a former Activision QA tester who worked his way up to the game-director role over the course of his 16 years working with id Software. Stratton assembled a team with a healthy mix of id veterans who have been with the studio for decades and new talent. Their first goal? Agree on a new tone.

In the early 2000s, id Software shifted the tone of its big franchises. Both Doom 3 and the Raven Software-developed 2009 Wolfenstein embraced a serious, moody aesthetic driven by atmospheric environments, leaving the comic-book sensibility and sense of humor found in the early titles by the wayside. This decision became a focal point of the reboot conversations.

"When we started talking about it we asked, 'What are we going to be inspired by?'" Stratton recalls. "Are we going to be inspired by Doom 3 and the more modern Wolfenstein games, or are we going to be inspired by Doom and Doom II? What do we feel like a new Doom should feel like and what should the attitude be? We all just kind of gravitated to that original feel."

Not only does the freewheeling combat vibe of the original play differently than Doom 3, it also feels unique in today's shooter landscape. Outside of occasional releases like Painkiller and Bulletstorm, the majority of shooters (think Call of Duty, Battlefield, Gears of War) opt for uber-serious military campaigns about saving the world from doomsday scenarios. Not this new Doom.

"Our mantra for this game is 'make it fun,'" says creative director Hugo Martin. "We try not to take ourselves too seriously. We're not a campy game, but we're not a serious space-opera game either. We're sort of in the middle."

This back-to-the-basics approach wowed fans when id took the veil off the reboot at Bethesda's E3 press conference last year. The crowd laughed delightfully at the over-the-top gore and cheered the explosive combat. The action felt completely in sync with the original, yet had a modern sheen that made Doom look new again. Leaving the impressive demo, many of the *Game Informer* staff wondered aloud if id could sustain that breakneck pace of combat over the course of an entire campaign, or if it would eventually succumb to repetition.

CRASHING THE DEMON PARTY

Visiting Doom headquarters gave us our first chance to see for ourselves if a hands-on play session could hold a candle to the riveting E3 demo. We join the iconic space marine a few beats after he awakens in a UAC bunker and realizes something is amiss. After making his way across the unforgiving Martian surface, he enters an industrial building that houses a satellite. Once he re-aligns the dish array, he hopes to find out why the halls are flooded with demons and learn where he needs to point his rifle to stop the invasion.

My first taste of Doom combat comes with a few of The Possessed, which are shambling zombies roaming the facility that id Software has playfully dubbed as "fodder." These undead pose no real threat to the space marine in and of themselves – one shot stuns the fodder, which opens up the opportunity to off them with a weapon, or move in for one of the entertaining glory kills. The player movement is fast and the controls on the Xbox One gamepad are incredibly responsive, which makes it easy to toy with these enemies. I stun one and then push in the right analog stick to initiate a glory kill. The marine rips the arm off the zombie and beats him to death with it. The next foe meets a similar fate as I finish it off by smashing its head into a wall.

Glory kills can be performed on the more dangerous demons once they are staggered

"Once you get really good at the game, the fodder is still fun to play with because you are just playing with your food," Martin says. "We always use the 'Bruce Lee on a skateboard' analogy because it's kind of like in those martial-arts movies where he's just taking out all these fodder guys any which way he wants. That's what you feel like with the zombies; they're just like punching bags."

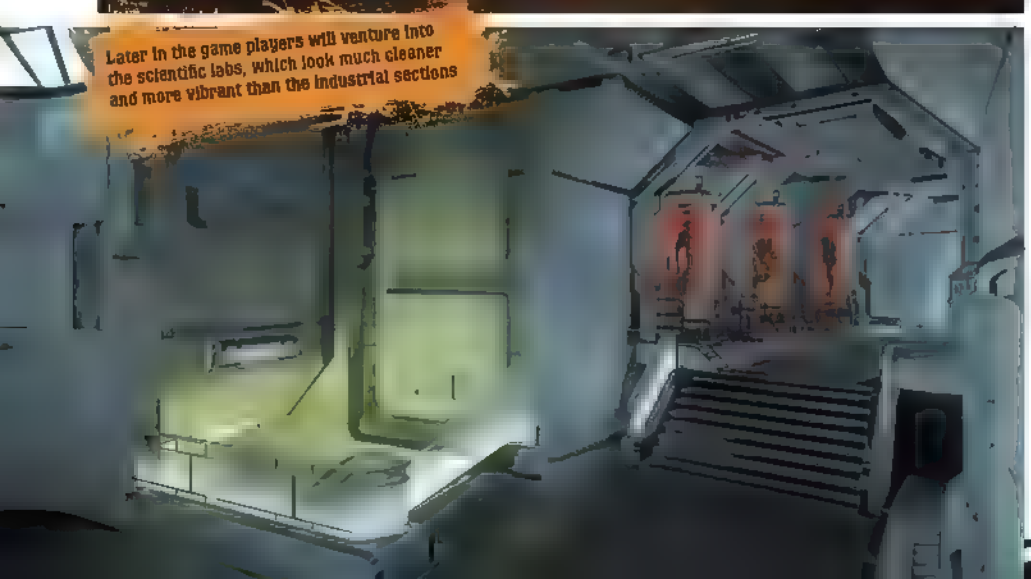
As I churn through ammunition taking out a roomful of enemies, I instinctually tap the X button to reload my shotgun or pistol, but this is a wasted motion. Doom sacrifices all at the altar of speed, which means FPS stand-bys like ammo reloading, cover systems, and sprinting are left by the wayside.

Coming to a computer terminal, I open up the blast shields over the condensation-covered windows to reveal the harsh environment of Mars. The UAC complex looks huge, but my gaze is pulled from this sprawling facility to a video recording from Dr. Olivia Pierce, who, based on first appearances, seems to have played a critical role in unleashing the demon presence. "My sisters and brothers, be thankful," Pierce says. "You will be the first. You will have a seat alongside them just as I will in what will become the new world they create for us. Starting now."

As I walk away from the console, Pierce continues her zealous rambling over the P.A. system, but my focus has returned to combat. Moving through a locker room, I find the iconic chainsaw buried in the torso of a fallen comrade. The space marine admires its satisfying hum in his hands before resuming the search for the satellite array control panel. A console in the next room triggers a visual recording, which id calls an echo, that shows a shambling zombie making its way through a locked door. I find another way into the room by moving through the ventilation system and vaulting up to a higher level.

The space marine is faster than nearly every demon he encounters, which means movement is the key to offensive strategy as well as defense. This maxim is put to the test as I enter a room housing a gore nest, a fleshy portal that serves as a conduit for the demons to cross into the world. When I rip the heart from the portal to shut it down, all hell breaks loose. Forget the monster closets of Doom 3; this is a demon avalanche. Suddenly, I'm severely outnumbered by more possessed zombies, imps, and hell knights. When the Nine Inch Nails-inspired soundtrack kicks into high gear, that's my cue to start the bloodbath.

The studio playfully refers to these arena-style battles – which typically feature some element of verticality – as skateparks due to the freedom of movement and opportunity for improvisation it affords the player. But as I find out in my first attempt to clear the room, if you are caught flat footed, you don't stand a chance in hell. "If you stand still, you're going to die," Martin says. "You have to move constantly. It's about running, circle strafing, jumping, and using movement as a defense. Breaking line of sight with elements in the environment. If you try to hide behind something, the enemies will find you and they will kill you."



Later in the game players will venture into the scientific labs, which look much cleaner and more vibrant than the industrial sections

KNOW YOUR ARSENAL

The hallmark of Doom weapon design has always been power. From the iconic shotgun to the BFG9000, these weapons get the job done. This carries forward in the new reboot.

"Doom is about fighting an onslaught of demons, which means you're often in the midst of a pretty massive fight," says game director Marty Stratton. "Having stopping power is really important and it makes it pretty fun."

To increase that stopping power, id has introduced a new weapons-mod system that gives the guns more flexibility than they've ever had. For instance, the rocket launcher has a remote detonator mod that allows you to trigger the explosion when it's most effective, and the heavy assault rifle has a barrage of micro missiles as an alternate-fire mode. Players gain access to these mods by finding delivery drones in the world, and you can hot swap them on the fly with the d-pad.

"If you've found all the mods, you can end up with a configuration that ends up with the effectiveness of 15 or so weapons – depending on what you find – all a flick or a push away," Stratton says.

Holding the right bumper on a controller brings up the weapon wheel, but once you memorize the position of a weapon on the wheel you can quickly access it by tapping the RB and flicking the right analog stick in the direction of the weapon. This makes swapping guns on the fly a seamless process.

Because the BFG and chainsaw are typically used in special circumstances, id removed them from the weapon wheel in favor of giving them their own dedicated buttons. Tapping down on the d-pad pulls up the chainsaw for a quick finisher, and when the situation gets out of control you can bring up the BFG by tapping the X button.

Closing these gore nests is required to clear sector lockdowns and move to new areas of the UAC facility

In my second attempt I fly around the room, embracing the art of hip fire, dodging the incoming fireballs, and vaulting up and down the platforms to isolate enemies. Explosive barrels are conveniently placed around the environment, giving players the opportunity to take down multiple enemies at once with a well-timed shot. Ammo inevitably runs low during these encounters, which necessitates the execution of glory kills or the use of the trusty chainsaw. This one-hit-kill machine runs on fuel, and the number of fuel cells you have determines which types of enemies you can use it on. One cell is all you need to slice through fodder, but bigger enemies like the mancubus require multiple cells to do the job. Getting up close and personal with the enemies to hack at them is risky, but the reward is worth it. Each enemy downed by the chainsaw bursts like a piñata with health and ammo.

PUTTING STORY IN ITS PLACE

Story has never been a cornerstone of the Doom franchise, which we all learned well with the horrible 2005 movie adaptation. The team at id Software is comfortable with narrative taking a backseat to the action, but that doesn't mean you can't piece together the mystery of what happened at this UAC facility.

"Story isn't something big in a Doom game, and we've taken that approach," says creative director Hugo Martin. "It's not what people come to Doom for, they come to kill demons and blow s--- up in amazing ways. That's really been the focus for us. That said, we've definitely infused some pretty good mystery and some fun things for players who want to find it and want to dive in and explore it a little bit."

By finding environmental clues and reading data entries, players can piece together what happened at this demon-infested UAC facility and learn more about the space marine as well.

After I'm done painting the room with demon blood, I finally get a breather. This downtime can be used to hunt for narrative clues or the various secrets hidden in each level. In classic Doom tradition, you need to find colored keycards to progress through previously closed doors. It's smart to note the location of these locked doors and backtrack once you have the required clearance to recover armor boosts, character upgrades, weapon mods, and even more advanced weapons you otherwise wouldn't receive until later in the game. When I ask Stratton if id is taking inspiration from Wolfenstein: The New Order and hiding clever nods to the classic Doom games, he coyly says, "Hmm ... Interesting. We have some doozies, that's all I can say. We definitely pay our respects in many ways."

After finding a mod that gives my shotgun a grenade-like ranged attack, I move through an airlock and get my first taste of the Martian surface. Another arena battle ensues with a variety of demons, and I'm amazed at how quickly I've grown comfortable with the pace of combat. I effortlessly bound up and down the environment, stringing together glory kills and always staying one-step ahead of my enemies. The area cleared, I make my way to the satellite array controls and the demo fades to black.

Before we jump into the second playable section of Doom, Stratton and Martin take us into id's large stadium-seating theater to see combat from the perspective of a seasoned player. This demo of the Lazarus Facility takes place further

ALL GORED UP

Doom looks to match the unique melee finishers introduced in Wolfenstein The New Order and raise the stakes with its impressive glory-kill system. These popcorn-horror finishers aren't just fun to watch, they yield more spoils than a typical weapons kill

After you do enough damage to an enemy, it becomes highlighted. When in this staggered state, you have a window to move in for a glory kill. These animated execution moves are contextual, meaning you will see different finishers depending on where you target the enemy. The versatility is impressive, through our playthroughs we targeted the limbs, torso, back, and head to see unique glory kills. Some of our laugh-inducing favorites included a death-from-above attack, and ripping out a mancubus' heart and shoving it down his throat so he chokes on it.

into the game. The setting is the deepest, nastiest laboratory in the UAC encampment, where scientists and occultists were clearly experimenting with demonic powers. Demon corpses rest on lab tables and are suspended in large fluid-filled tubes. A public service announcement is blaring over the intercom system, warning that "demonic presence at unsafe levels." The clean, sparse environment stands in stark contrast to the more industrial section we played through, speaking to the variety of locations id has planned for the game.

For this demo, Martin takes control of the space marine who is equipped with various upgrades focused on dexterity. These enhancements allow the player to swap weapons, mantle, and even execute glory kills more quickly. Each time Martin pulls off a finisher, he's given a temporary speed gain. This boost is stackable if you execute several glory kills in a row, making this setup seem like a great option for speedrunners trying to cruise through the campaign in record time.

The speed of the combat during this demonstration is remarkable; it makes Call of Duty's combat look like a senior citizen using a walker. Martin vaults around the environment, swapping between his Swiss-army-knife collection of weapons as the situation dictates and laying waste to the sea of demons in impressive fashion.

Watching stylish runs like this brings to mind all the eye-popping combat clips I've watched from skill-oriented games like Battlefield or Dishonored over the years. The combat gives players a lot of freedom of expression, and the feats of skill you can string together makes Doom highly watchable. "I think this game is going to be amazing from a player's 'Xbox record that,' YouTube-posting perspective," Stratton says.

Doom's new version of Hell is heavily inspired by heavy-metal album covers

HELLBOUND FURY

Our second playable demo transports us into Hell. The rocky environments, bloody pools, and stormy skies all call to mind the original environments, but the Doom reboot introduces more elements that wouldn't feel out of place on an Iron Maiden cover.

This region of hell is called Titan's Realm, a desolate graveyard to ancient, building-sized demons. The space marine must jump down into the dusty skeleton of one of these buried titans to recover an item called The Crucible. This setting wouldn't be out of place if it were transposed to Double Fine's Brütal Legend.

"Rock 'n' roll was our inspiration for everything," Martin says. "There is a lot of heavy metal in our hell, and that is intentional. When you look at the original Doom, we always said it looks like the kind of stuff a 15-year-old would draw on the back of his notebook during math class. We really wanted the world to look like that – to have a certain personality that would shine through in everything we did. So we have a lot of skulls; it's kind of over the top. A little bit of Castle Grayskull in there, it's very He-Man."

I enter through the skull of the giant cyberdemon and plummet hundreds of feet to a temple-like building that houses the Crucible. My greeting party is a pair of cacodemons, one of the more advanced classic Doom enemies. To match the more formidable flying foes, I have access to nearly the full assortment of Doom weapons, including the chaingun, rocket launcher, and plasma rifle.

Hell has much more verticality than the UAC facilities, which makes me glad I now have the double-jump for traversal. Using the multiple levels is key to staying alive once the demons roll out heavy hitters like spectres, barons of hell, the revenant, lost souls, pinky, and the mancubus. Teleportals and jump pads are also conveniently placed around the arenas, affording me opportunities to flank unsuspecting enemies for a quick glory kill.

Accessing your full arsenal is key to surviving these more frenzied encounters. The plasma rifle mod that temporarily stuns an enemy is a great boon when surrounded by powerful enemies. Pulling up the weapon wheel also slows down time momentarily, which can help you get your head around the combat scenario before jumping back into the action.

Each enemy has a particular weakness you can exploit to make short work of some targets. For instance, pinky is fully armored in front, but when it charges you can double-jump over it and unload the super shotgun on its backside.

The demo ends in a flurry of attacks from barons of hell, spectres, and a summoner. I barely escape alive, which makes me marvel at the possibility of running through this area on the infamous nightmare difficulty.

DEATHMATCH REVIVAL

Doom may have introduced players to the term deathmatch, but if you didn't play the first two entries in the mid '90s, you likely don't associate the series with multiplayer. While the early Doom games allowed players to connect with each other via a network to face off head-to-head, id's later series, Quake, is better known for popularizing competitive multiplayer in first-person shooters.

"When you look historically at what we've done, we haven't done an internal multiplayer game or something we created or directed from the beginning since Quake III," Stratton says. "Doom 3 had some multiplayer, but it wasn't as widely played. The single-player content was what we were most concerned with."

For the reboot, id is jumping back into the arena with an approach that captures what players loved about Doom I and II. The contemporary shooter landscape offers a lot of variety, from the tactical skirmishes of Counter-Strike to the fast-paced, close-quarters shoot-outs of Call of Duty. Doom eschews these modern approaches in favor of a speed-oriented skirmish style that calls to mind the arena-shooter era when Quake and Unreal Tournament ruled the day. Why go with an old-school approach that seems at best marginalized and at worst abandoned in today's market?

"It's what we like to play," Stratton says. "If you love what you're doing, you're going to do it really well."

Along with its internal development team that drives the creative decision making, id Software enlisted the help of Austin-based studio Certain Affinity to build this new approach to multiplayer. Having designed maps for both

INTRODUCING UPGRADES

Exploring the environments in Doom isn't all about finding new weapons mods, players can also uncover three tiers of upgrades to improve their space marine.

If you stumble upon a white chest, grab the glowing orb contained within. These items, called argent cells, allow you to increase your armor, ammo, or health capacity.

The second type of enhancement is a performance upgrade, which improves various general capability categories like equipment effectiveness and agility. These are gained by finding enhancement tokens on fallen elite guards. The final type of upgrade is a rune, which can be combined to tailor your skills to particular play style. If you find yourself dying a lot, activate a saving throw that momentarily slows down the action when you drop under 25 percent health. If you are gunning for a speedrun, choose runes that increase your dexterity when executing glory kills or swapping weapons.

The rune system is not an RPG-style skill tree that locks you into your decisions. Instead, you can reconfigure your runes at a moment's notice to give you an advantage for the scenario at hand.

Finding a demon token gives you control of enemies like the revenant or baron of hell in multiplayer matches

Halo and Call of Duty, Certain Affinity is no stranger to the competitive shooter landscape

As you would expect from an arena shooter, Doom multiplayer is hyperkinetic and bombastic. The six-on-six skirmishes also stand out for their time-to-death ratios. If an opponent gets the jump on you, that doesn't necessarily spell your doom, as you can take much more damage than you do in a game like Call of Duty. This is not a one-shot, you're dead experience; id wants engagements to feel more like a back-and-forth duel.

This approach shined through in our hands-on time with the multiplayer. Matches feel decidedly old-school, with quad damage and invisibility power-ups and weapons littered across the maps. Many firefights turn into dances between individual opponents as you whittle away each other's health bars. Players can also collect a power-up to assume the role of a demon – we saw the revenant and baron of hell as options in the matches we played – to chalk up some rapid kills.

The first mode we played, Warpath, has both teams vying for control of a mobile domination point that drifts around the map at a steady pace. Each player is outfitted with two weapons and a piece of equipment like a grenade, threat sensor that highlights nearby enemies through walls, or siphon grenade that sucks health from the enemies in the blast radius and gives it to you

Before jumping into a match, the player can choose their loadout and up to four hack modules These timer-based perks are earned through the progression system and are meant to give you a quick advantage in battle. The four available for our match were Power Seeker, which highlights the closest power-up for 120 seconds; Retribution, which highlights the location of your most recent killer for 30 seconds; Supply Timer, which shows the respawn timers for all nearby power-ups for 120 seconds, and Armor Plating, which gives you a +10 armor boost for your next life. You can choose which hack module to use before each respawn.

The majority of these hack modules are meant to emphasize your awareness of the surroundings to make you more effective "None of these throw off the competitive balance," Stratton says. "None of these affect how powerful your gun is or anything like that."

The second multiplayer mode we played was Clan Arena, which is essentially a best-of-five team-based Last Man Standing experience. Each player only has one life, and the team that executes all of the competition first wins the round.

The multiplayer arsenal extends beyond the suite of weapons available in the single-player mode Among the new guns we see on display during battle are a sniper-rifle like vortex rifle, a selective-fire battle rifle called the repeater, and the static cannon, a slow-firing beam rifle that gets more powerful as you run. The heavy assault rifle and lightning gun were also added to the rotation for these matches.

NEXT-GEN IDTECH

Thanks to the programming genius of John Carmack, id Software has always been synonymous with future-leaning game engines. Just because he's left to join Oculus, however, doesn't mean the tech is suddenly in peril.

For the new Doom, the programmers essentially rewrote the entire engine from a rendering perspective. The new physically based renderer ensures all the surfaces in the world react as you would expect to light and shadow, such as realistic shines off of metal or reflections in blood pools.

Game director Marty Stratton is bullish on the idTech 6 engine. "It's our strongest tech we've ever had," he says. "I'm super proud of the team. To do all that at 60 frames per second and 1080p, it's a real feather in the cap of the team here. It's something they take a huge amount of pride in. Their mantra is we want to be the best looking game on the market at 1080p and 60 frames per second."

As always, id plans to deliver sliders and multi-sampling options to the fervent PC player base to push their high-end rigs beyond these benchmarks

It's a Mod World

In addition to a single-player campaign and full multiplayer suite, id Software wanted to make sure the Doom reboot featured another core element that speaks to the series' legacy: modding.

The Doom franchise has a long history with the mod community; in the mid '90s, many of the best gaming experiences I had were from playing the deep collection of PWAD files you could download for Doom. These user-generated mods transported players to many familiar universes, from *The Simpsons* to *Aliens*. Even Star Wars: Dark Forces, one of the seminal shooters of the era, was preceded by a Star Wars PWAD. Lots of game developers found their way into the industry via Doom mods, but building and sharing these files was a cumbersome process.

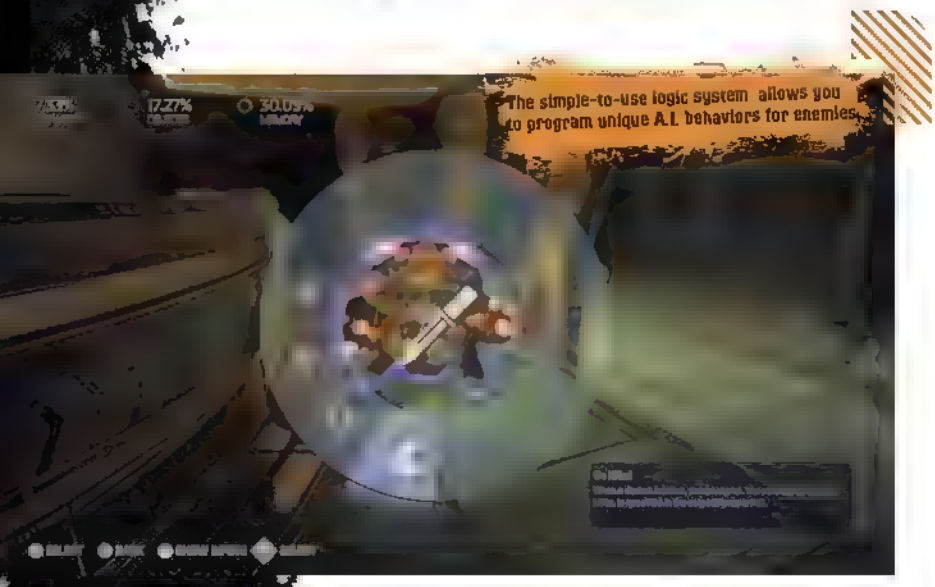
For the Doom reboot, id wants to open the creative process up to more than just modders with advanced programming skills. "When we started with the initial concept for what we wanted to do with Doom, there was no doubt that we wanted to provide players with the opportunity to create their own content," Stratton says. "It is part of the heritage and legacy of not only Doom but id. We've done it for years releasing our source code, allowing people to create maps and modes, but we knew we needed to do it in a way that allowed everybody to do it and not just restrict it to people with experience or special expertise in these areas."

Enter SnapMap. This suite of creative tools essentially gives players all of the Lego pieces from the Doom campaign and arms them with a toolbox for building their own single-player missions, cooperative game modes, or multiplayer experiences. Detailed tutorials and reference maps give newcomers the foundation to begin the creative process in less than 15 minutes, and the technology is flexible enough to allow advanced creators to build rich experiences.

To develop SnapMap, id Software brought on Escalation Studios, which it had worked with previously to build the mobile title Doom Resurrection. Escalation proved to be a great fit because of its president, Tom Mustaine, a long-time developer who cut his teeth creating PWADs for Doom and Heretic.

"Back then, you would push up against the limits of the tech, and it was hard to find stuff," Mustaine says. "You had to log into FTP sites and all of this craziness. Now, with the technology available today, and what we are doing with SnapMap, you have the same kind of ability of creating something from nothing, but you don't need the experience of being a hardcore level designer, and read tutorials for days or weeks on end. You can build something within 10 minutes.

"You can make extraordinarily cool content, and easily make gameplay in it. Or you can dig a little deeper and make more advanced content. It's on par with actually writing code. I think [SnapMap] is the first of its kind – a full in-game tool that, regardless of the platform, you can create content and share it with your friends and publish it to the world for multiplayer, co-op, and single-player. You can also make stuff that is just fun."



The variation the studios have seen thus far when putting SnapMap in the hands of developers is impressive, from tower-defense modes and moody single-player missions to VIP escorts and racing challenges. Stratton has always worked on the production side of the equation, so given his lack of programming know-how, he considers himself a litmus test for how intuitive the creation suite is. "After 20 years in the industry, it's given me a new outlet in how I feel I can do cool things" he says.

Rather than continue to extol the virtues of SnapMap's flexibility, id drops us straight into the four-part beginners' tutorial. In a few short minutes, I build a simple monster-closet scenario where a demon spawns to attack after you press the button on a computer console. In my second project, I fill a room with demons and explosive barrels, signaling the horde to attack full bore once they spot the player. Another sequence introduces me to A.I. automation, which I use to drive several randomly spawning enemies in a corridor. From object placement to assigning logic to the various enemies, the system is easy to learn, though it definitely has an advanced layer of systems that will take time to master.

After our tour of the suite ends, we're dropped into a four-player cooperative experience built with SnapMap that pits our team against waves of increasingly difficult enemies. Between rounds, we can use the currency earned from kills to reinforce defenses and purchase new weaponry from a store we access through a portal. This feels like a fleshed-out game mode, and it was created in 12 hours.

All of the user-created content is surfaced via the SmartHub. Discovery should prove easy thanks to the various sorting categories like top rated, featured, newest, and most played. Your friends' creations are given a dedicated page as well, or you can search by name or tag to find content that doesn't rise to the surface. The studio is also curating playlists of user-created multiplayer matches for the various modes, giving players another place to find competition. Best of all, downloading these new experiences hardly takes any time at all.

"Because everybody already has all the parts and pieces, there's nothing that has to be uploaded or downloaded other than this really small instruction file," Stratton says.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

When a game franchise takes 11 years off, it sounds a lot of warning bells in my head. But based on my experience playing Doom, none of my initial apprehensions feel relevant. In an era where the shooter genre has morphed in so many directions, it's surprising how refreshing and unique Doom plays despite its steadfast dedication to preserving so many core elements of the original.

From my hands-on time with the single-player campaign, multiplayer, and SnapMap user-creation suite, this series looks to be heading on the right trajectory for its spring release. Like the 2014 Wolfenstein reboot, this id Software franchise looks to be poised for a major return to form, and should attract longtime fans and newcomers alike.

"It feels like we're going to be introducing a whole new generation of players to what Doom is all about," Stratton says.

We have a strong feeling they're going to like it.

For more interviews, videos, and in-depth features on Doom, visit gameinformer.com/doom

The SnapMap blueprint mode makes it easy to design the layout of single-player, cooperative, or multiplayer environments

THE TOP 50 GAMES OF 2015

Each year, the video game industry evolves and changes. For all of the new technology, personalities, and innovations we saw rise to prominence in 2015, the year in gaming is not represented by any one trend or headline. Instead, it is defined through the varied and entertaining titles gamers were playing around the world.

This year marked the end of the transition to current-gen, as most major releases shed their PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 counterparts. That move allowed developers to find their footing and showcase what the newer consoles are capable of. Games like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Batman: Arkham Knight, and Star Wars: Battlefront fill the screen with impressively rendered worlds that would have been held back on older hardware.

More than ever, the games of 2015 show how you can choose to spend as much – or as little – time playing as you please. From bite-sized sessions of Rocket League to Fallout 4 adventures that take dozens of hours, this year had great options for all levels of commitment.

People looking for popcorn-movie experiences had gems like Just Cause 3 and Helldivers. On the other hand, titles like Soma, Her Story, and Life is Strange provided rich narrative fodder for discussions that lasted long after the credits rolled.

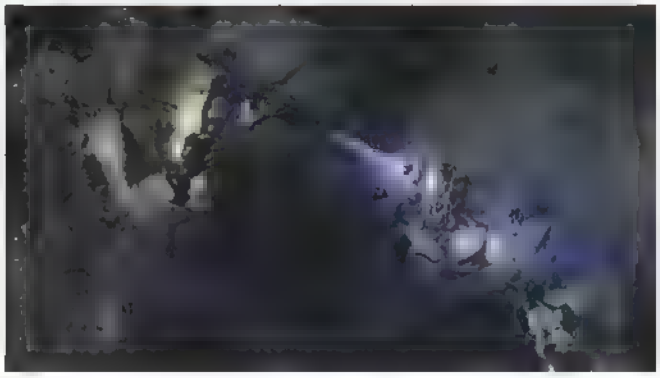
No matter what games you play or how you play them, the last year saw some fantastic releases that continued to broaden our expectations and bring in new types of players. From indie surprises to big-budget blockbusters, these are our selections for the best games of 2015 listed in the order in which they were released.

BY GAME INFORMER STAFF

Dying Light

January 27•••PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Dying Light champions fluid movement and close-quarters combat – both important facets of life in the zombie apocalypse. Vaulting across rooftops and squeezing between alleyways as the infected hordes surge after you is a tense experience. The crafting system lets you make crazy weapons (like buzzsaws on sledgehammers), so fighting your way out of a situation is just as thrilling as escaping it.



Evolve

February 10•••PS4 • Xbox One • PC

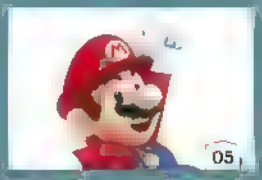
Evolve received a lot of flak for its perceived lack of content, but that didn't prevent it from being a unique and entertaining multiplayer experience. An array of creative weapons and gadgets gave co-op fans a fighting chance against their hulking competitor in Evolve's epic, boss-fight inspired showdowns. Our love affair with Evolve may have been short, but it was definitely sweet.

TOP 10 HEADLINES

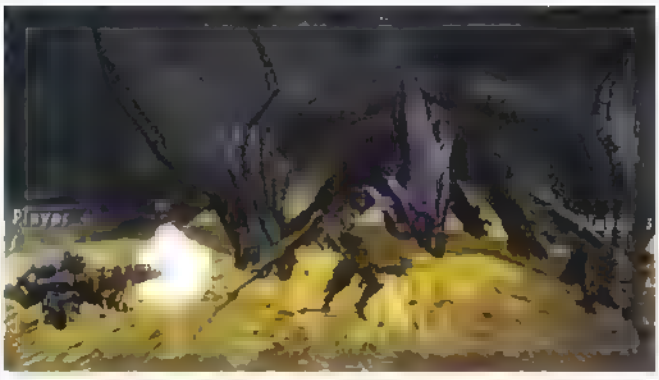
Konami and
new level

Activision Buys King

Microsoft Buries



Nintendo Goes Mobile
take on free-to-play could



Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate

February 13•••3DS

Capcom's latest Monster Hunter title to hit the 3DS in North America is the best jumping-on point for would-be fans of the overseas hit. Helpful weapon introductions, furry cat warrior friends, and an increased focus on verticality in environments help round out the package. Once you find your weapon of choice, expect to pour dozens of hours into the hunt for bigger monsters and better gear.

Hand Of Fate

February 17•••PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Mac

Hand of Fate successfully and surprisingly melds disparate genres; it's a compelling mix of deck-building, card collection, and dungeon-crawling through an action/RPG lens. Players travel through bizarre backdrops and ever-expanding adventures as they encounter creatures and cards in a procedurally generated face-off with the mysterious, ever-taunting dealer.

Helldivers

March 3•••PS4 • PS3 • Vita • PC

Sometimes dramatic stones and nuanced characters can take a backseat to blasting alien bugs. Helldivers advances the top-down shooter formula with a wealth of unique unlockables, a fun community-driven campaign, and a demanding focus on cooperative play. Whether you're expertly coordinating attacks or crushing your teammates with drop pods, defending Super Earth with your friends is a delight.

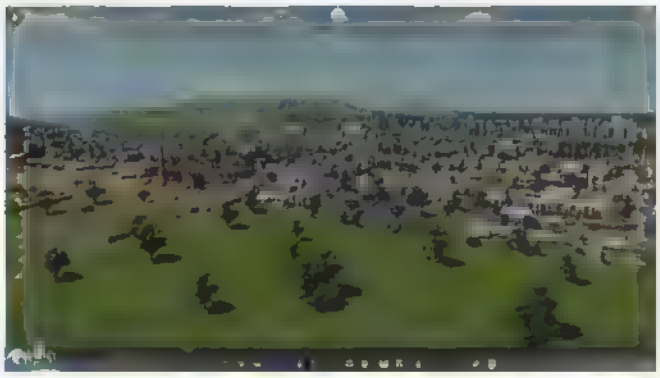
Microsoft Brings Back-ward Compatibility

Big Publishers Build eSports Division

Bethesda Delivers Fallout 4 Bomb

Sony's E3 Surprises

Dinklebot Erased from Destiny



Cities Skylines

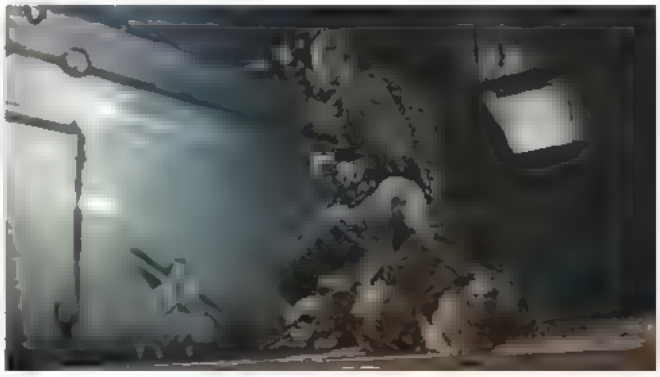
March 10 • • • PC

The perfect simulator for aspiring urban planners, Cities Skylines is a standout example of the city-building genre, letting players turn a small plot of land into a thriving metropolis to maintain through careful micromanagement. Skylines has a steep learning curve, but it's a must-play for gamers who enjoy mastering complex systems – especially those who found the last SimCity disappointing

Ori And The Blind Forest

March 11 • • • Xbox One • PC

Ori and the Blind Forest has lovely visuals and a storytelling style that immediately creates a sense of wonder. Players explore a gorgeous side-scrolling world, gather new abilities, and conquer difficult platforming challenges as a guardian spirit charged with rejuvenating a dying forest. The game almost feels like an animated film, though the precise and entertaining gameplay remains top-notch

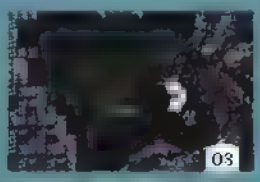


Resident Evil Revelations 2

March 18 • • • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • Vita • PC

Fan favorites Claire Redfield and Barry Burton return for a new episodic adventure set on a mysterious prison island. Capcom improves the back-to-basics gunplay by adding a better dodge mechanic and campaign co-op (starring Claire, Barry, Moira Burton, and a mysterious little girl). Come to double-team the hordes of murderous creatures, stay for Barry's groan-inducing dad jokes and one-liners.

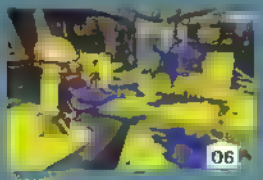
TOP 10 SUGGESTIONS



Bloodborne

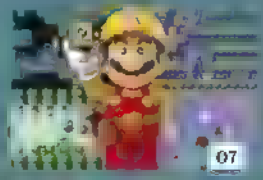
March 24 ···PS4

From Software's beautiful ride through horror takes Dark Souls' DNA and twists it into an aggressive, atmospheric experience that's the studio's finest game to date. Haunting music, terrifying boss encounters, transforming weapons, and precise combat come together in an immersive, nightmarish world. Face your fears, take on impossible challenges, and emerge victorious bathed in blood and moonlight.



Good Games, Good Support

Giving devs such as Nintendo and CD Projekt Red won over fans with worthwhile updates and free content expansions regularly after the releases of Splatoon and The Witcher 3.



Anyone Can Make A Mario Level

In 2015, Nintendo fans across the world were finally able to create and share the levels of their dreams. Even better—they're fun to play!

High-End Controllers

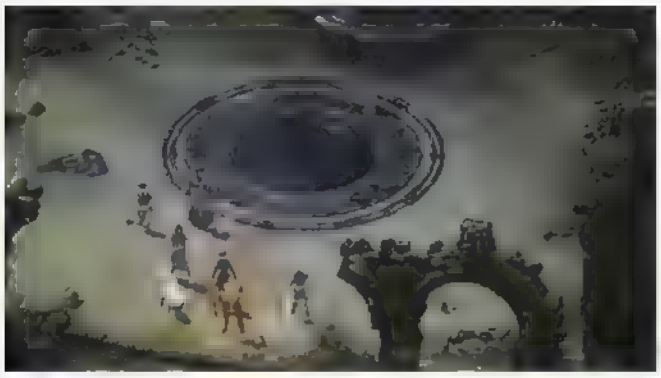
Controllers are where the rubber meets the road with video games, and just like car tires, you're rewarded for investing in quality like Scuf and Microsoft's Elite options.

Kickstarter Proves Its Worth

Crowdfunding delivered some awesome games this year like Broken Age, Undertale, Pillars of Eternity, Massive Chalice, and Shovel Knight's free Plague Knight DLC, to name a few.

Improved Player-Selection Options

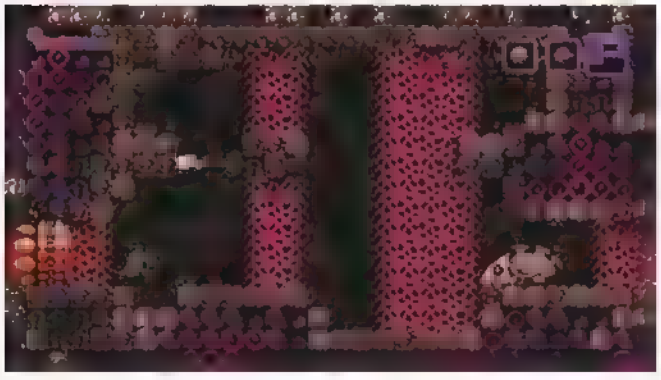
Choice matters, so it was nice to see Fallout 4 improve character customization, AC: Syndicate pair male and female protagonists, and FIFA 16 debut female soccer players.



Pillars Of Eternity

March 26 ··PC • Mac • Linux

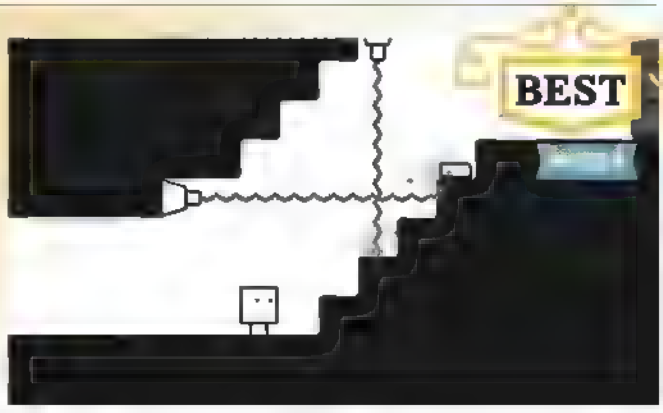
The classic PC RPG epic is alive and well. Look no further than Obsidian's sprawling world, rich characters, and crafted dungeons to find a no-compromises approach to role-playing. From a massive mega-dungeon to entire character-focused sub-stories, Pillars of Eternity defies traditional notions of side content, making every activity communicate emotion, magic, and adventure.



Axiom Verge

March 31 ··PS4 • PC

Instead of waiting for another 2D Metroid title, developer Tom Happ made one himself. Created solely by Happ, Axiom Verge builds on the traditions set by Nintendo's classic series, but with its own haunting atmosphere and clever mechanics. With inventive weapons, an expansive map, and fantastic music, Axiom Verge infuses side-scrolling exploration with new life.

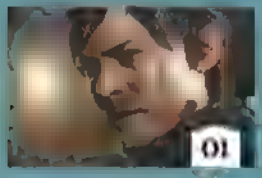


Box Boy

April 2 ··3DS

HAL Laboratory is best known for helming Nintendo's Super Smash Bros. and Kirby series, which is why the relatively simple black-and-white Box Boy is a bit of a departure for the studio. Box Boy makes up for what it lacks in color with clever puzzle design, attractive visuals, and firm-but-fair challenge. A highlight of the 3DS eShop, Box Boy is one of Nintendo's successful 2015 experiments.

TOP 10 DISAPPOINTMENTS



Silent Hills Canceled

Shooters Come

Broken Ports Neglected

Maxis Shuts Down

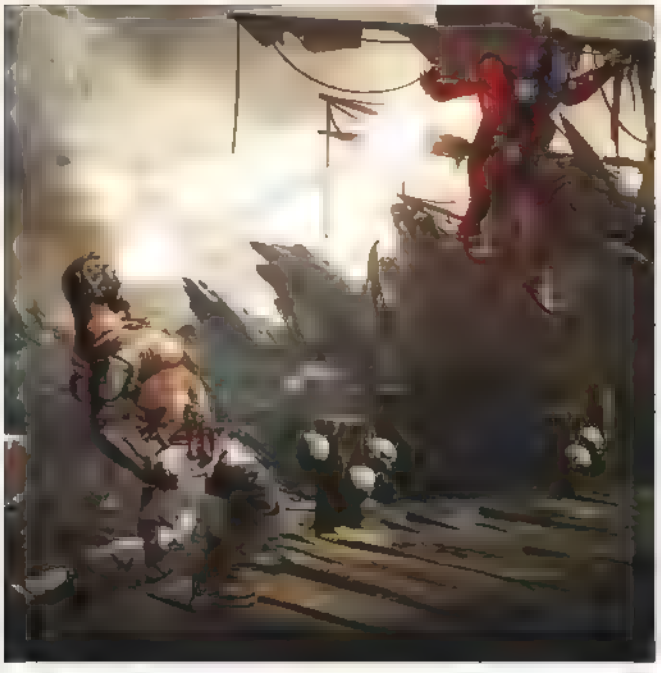
Diabolical

place in $60 games

Mortal Kombat X

April 14 • PS4 • Xbox One • PC

The latest installment in the long-running fighting franchise adds a new generation of characters, letting you play as the descendants of some of Mortal Kombat's staple characters. The story mode is surprisingly lighthearted, the mechanics are as tight as ever, and the fatalities are as gruesome as they are amusing. Mortal Kombat X knows what fans want, and dishes out as much as they can handle.



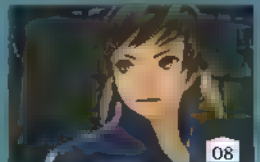
Broken Age

April 28 • PS4 • PC • Vita • iOS • Android

Double Fine's adventure game was an early Kickstarter success, and the result is a thoughtful two-part reflection on growing up and independence. Other entries in the genre have deemphasized puzzles in favor of pure story, but Tim Schafer and his team injected deviously complex mind-melters into Broken Age. You won't look at knots the same way again.

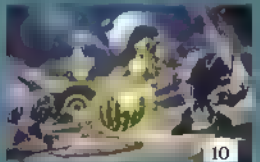
Fading Handheld Systems

Halo 5's Non-Showdown



The JRPG Climate

Steam's Expansion



Nintendo's E3

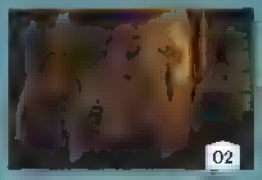
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

May 19 • PS4 • Xbox One • PC

The third installment in the Witcher series is the most ambitious project yet from CD Projekt RED, and the studio knocks it out of the park. The culmination of Geralt's adventures is set in a breathtaking open world filled with intriguing people and vicious monsters. With its tense battles, superb storytelling, and difficult choices that ripple throughout the world, we've selected The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt as Game Informer's Game of the Year

TOP 10 MOMENTS

Comparison (Batman:



Witcher 3: Wild Hunt)

(Metal Gear Solid V:

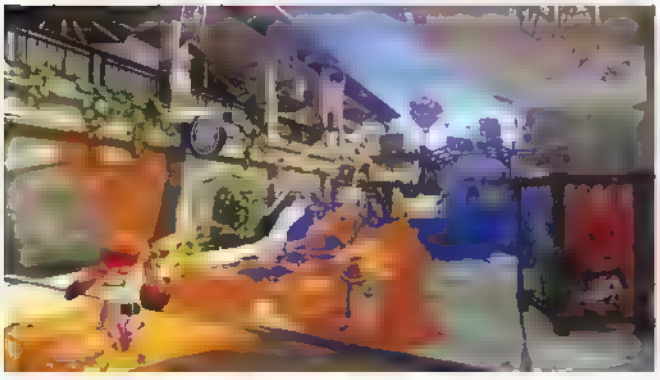
(Undertale)

and the Blind Forest)

Heroes Of The Storm

June 2 • PC • Mac

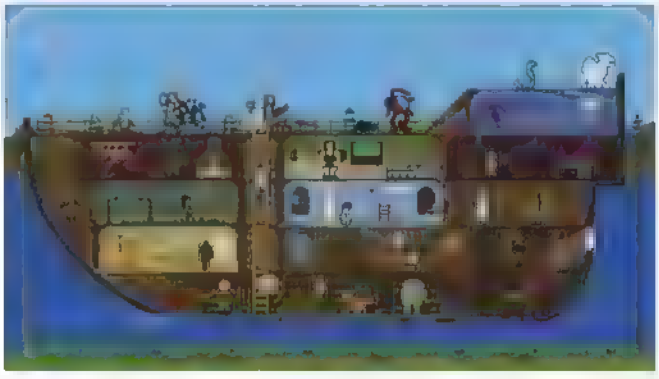
Entering the entangled MOBA market today is a daunting task, but Blizzard finds success with Heroes of the Storm. Leveraging its popular properties to create insane scenarios (Diablo and Kerrigan battling Cho'gal and Kael'thas? Sure!), this MOBA is easier to pick up and play than others, yet still provides plenty of competitive opportunities as it breaks into the eSports scene.



Splatoon

May 29 • Wii U

Nothing else is quite like Splatoon. Slathering paint all over the world with your team while listening to the strange soundtrack is the charm of this unconventional shooter. We didn't like Splatoon's limited content at release, but Nintendo has since bolstered it significantly with new weapons, modes, and other features. If you haven't revisited Splatoon recently, give it another shot.



You Must Build A Boat

June 4 • PC • OS • Android

A follow-up to Lucca Redwood's hit 10000000, You Must Build a Boat is an addictive and immensely enjoyable runner/match-three hybrid that rewards player for their efforts by giving them glorious loot they can use to build a fancy boat. Its accessible gameplay and quirky sense of humor keep you going when the challenge kicks in, creating a whimsical treat that's hard to put down.

Being a Hero

team in a 40-person match.

Flawless Tactical Victory

Digital Dilemma (Soma)

What's Happening Here? (Life is Strange)

Confronting Oryx

sight than Saturn's newest moon.

Batman: Arkham Knight

June 23 • PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Even after seeing Batman's tricks in previous games, Arkham Knight proves that the Caped Crusader is still capable of delivering worthwhile surprises. The Batmobile may come out of the garage with a few flat tires, but the story and action fire on all cylinders. From the array of cool gadgets to the story's surprise twist, Rocksteady proves once again that it knows how to do Batman right.

Her Story

June 24 • PC • iOS

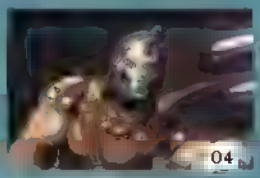
Developer Sam Barlow captures the thrill of playing detective in his twisted tale about a missing husband. Using a search database, you type in keywords and examine the testimony of the victim's wife to spot contradictions and gather clues. With plenty of subtext and the standout performance from Viva Seifert, Her Story leaves you thinking long after it's over

Rocket League

July 7 • PS4 • PC

Rocket League is a strange, fascinating machine: a turbo-powered version of soccer played with RC cars instead of humans. It's also a fantastic competitive experience, sporting a soundtrack that gets the blood pumping and a physics system that creates a ferocious (and often hilarious) back-and-forth battle that makes losing a match just as much fun as winning

TOP 10 CHARACTERS



Galak-Z: The Dimensional

August 4 • • • PS4 • PC

The anime-inspired space battles of Galak Z are hard to back down from thanks to rich visuals, smart enemy encounters, and tight controls. 17-Bit's unique shooter/roguelike mashup takes players to the outer rim of the galaxy, gives them a spaceship that transforms into a robot, and then lets them explore a series of challenging, randomly generated levels packed with creative power-ups.

Volume

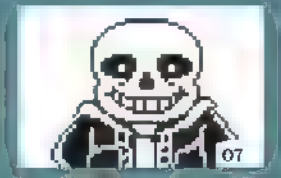
August 18 • • • PS4 • PC • Vita

A stealth puzzler based on Robin Hood? Makes perfect sense. Developer Mike Bithell also draws inspiration from Metal Gear Solid: VR Missions, encouraging players to use their brains and a number of gadgets to sneak past enemies. A challenging series of trials with a unique aesthetic, Volume is a grand time for those who appreciate the fine art of old-school sneaking.

Madden NFL 16

August 25 • • • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360

Madden 16's gameplay finally looks and feels more like what we see on Sundays. Gang tackles, contested balls, and better hit physics combine with a new icon-based catching and defending mechanic so every play is different and exciting. Connected Franchise is still uneven, but the new Draft Champions bolsters the title's Ult mate Team mode. This is the Madden you've been waiting for.



Mortal Kombat X

just a bonus.

Life is Strange!

her endearing

Evil: Revelations 2

Until Dawn

August 25 • • PS4

Sony had the sleeper hit of the year thanks to Supermassive's ambitious approach to choose-your-own-adventure storytelling. Unlike many adventure games, your myriad choices hold long-reaching consequences for the cast of expendable teens. Until Dawn helps raise the bar for interactive narratives with top-notch visuals, quality acting, and a twist laden script that gives horror fans plenty to love.

Lara Croft Go

August 27 • • • PC • iOS • Android

Following in Hitman Go's footsteps, Lara Croft Go is an intriguing turn-based puzzler with a board-game aesthetic. Players step into the famed tomb raider's boots to help her navigate mazes, outwit enemies, and avoid traps. This experimental take on a beloved franchise is a lovely gem that will delight those in search of a quality brain teaser.

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

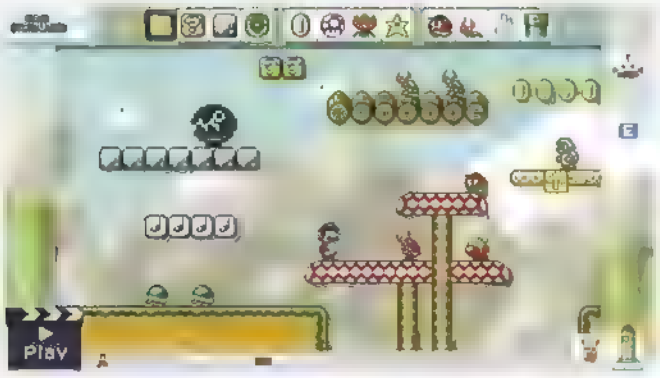
September 1 • • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

Embracing open-world stealth and abandoning the linear corridors of past entries, The Phantom Pain is a new frontier for Metal Gear. In addition to sneaking around, Big Boss oversees an entire army; players recruit soldiers, build a base, and develop new technology. These activities keep you hooked as this chapter in Hideo Kojima's saga unfolds – complete with a shocking ending.

TOP 10 DORKS

Vaughn (Tales From

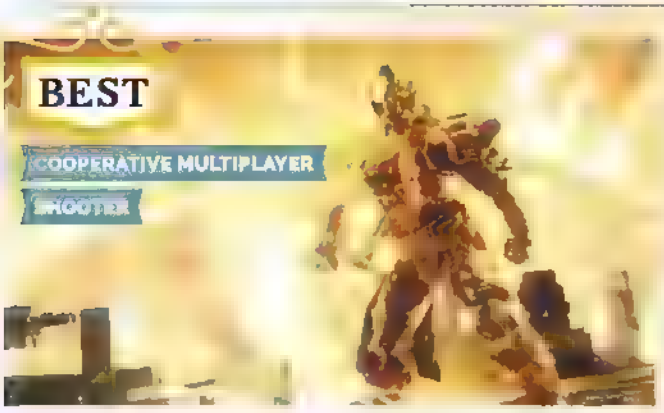
Spike (Need For Speed)



Super Mario Maker

September 11 • Wii U

The only people who can make a better Mario game than Nintendo are its legion of adoring fans. Nintendo bet on this concept with Super Mario Maker, which is the most accessible and polished suite of creation tools to ever to hit a console. The result is a nearly infinite stream of community-made Super Mario Bros. levels that grows more creative with each passing day.



Destiny: The Taken King

September 15 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360

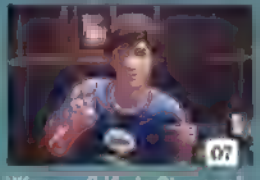
Whether you think of it as a full-fledged release or an expansion to one of last year's biggest games, you can't deny that Bungie made some major strides forward with The Taken King. Character-focused storytelling grounds the sci-fi grandeur, drawing players in to the world. Deterministic rewards, improved leveling, and a focus on week to week events make Destiny a love affair that's hard to walk away from.

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016

September 15 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

Sublime players make the unreal look ordinary, and Pro Evo 2016 has recaptured that feeling of footy excellence that's been missing since the series' PS2 heyday. Fluidity, control, and even the unexpected are at your feet, while an improving Master League and the Ultimate Team-esque MyClub fantasy mode make this title the year's best soccer game.

Eris Morn (Destiny: The Taken King)
The sole survivor of a failed raid on Hellmouth, Eris Morn has the right to be emo. That's no excuse for giving out raisins instead of candy during the Festival of the Lost, though.



Warren (Life is Strange)
Warren may have a crush on Max, but his one true love is science fiction. From "going ape" for *The Planet of the Apes* to his *X-Files*-inspired vanity plates, he earns his status of alpha nerd.

Tatsu (Xenoblade Chronicles X)
Shaped like a Miran vegetable, Tatsu's most memorable trait is calling for Linky's constant jokes about cooking him. Quit worrying, Tatsu – no one wants to look at you, let alone eat you.

Kazuhira Miller (Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain)
Miller is angstier than a teenager going through a bad breakup. He also puts more thought into his fledgling burger chain than building up Mother Base. Thanks a lot, Miller.

Kerbals (Kerbal Space Program)
These lovable goofballs have advanced degrees in aeronautical science and engineering. Thankfully, they don't object to being blown to smithereens for science.

Undertale

September 15 • • PC

Toby Fox's retro RPG is bursting with life and charm, from creative characters to a delightful dynamic soundtrack. The simple combat mechanics take on surprising new forms in each encounter, and players make choices that lead to new outcomes and hidden battles. Undertale is an unforgettable experience that stays with you long after the final secrets are discovered

TOP 10 PUBLISHERS

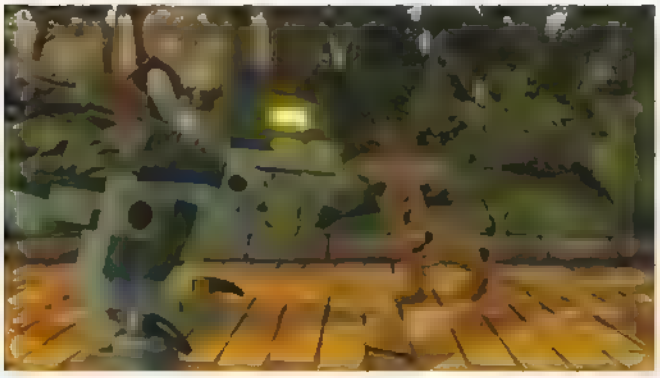
Sony Computer Entertainment

While Sony had a weaker holiday season, the company still gave us Bloodborne, God of War III Remastered, Helldivers, MLB 15: The Show, and the surprise hit Until Dawn.

Soma

September 22 ••• PS4 • PC • Mac

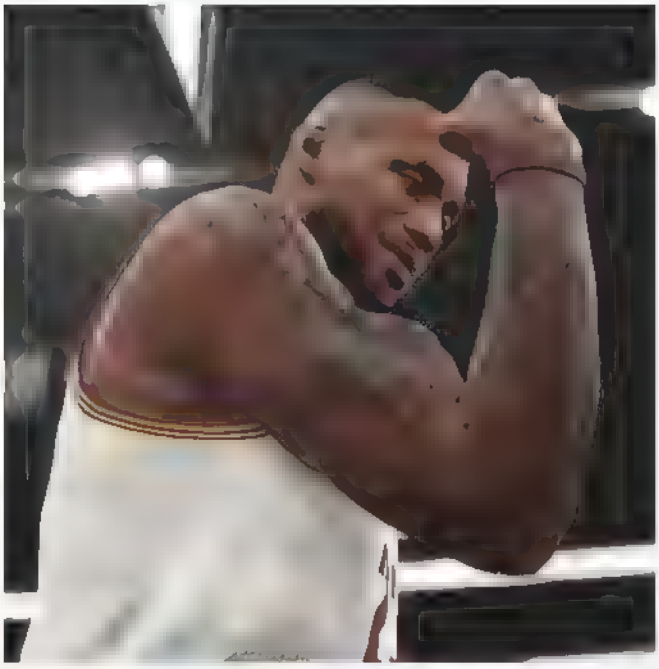
Frictional Games put itself on the map with Amnesia: The Dark Descent, but Soma showcases new strengths for the studio. This tale of existential horror makes up for a lack of memorable scares with a desperate story set on the ocean floor that will gnaw at your mind for weeks. The less you know, the better – but prepare to question your existing definitions of humanity

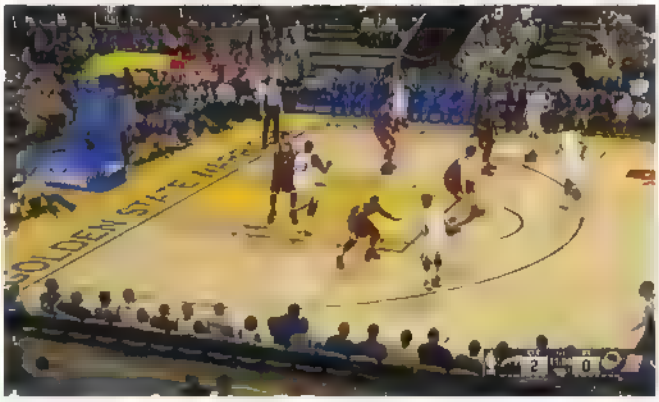


Lego Dimensions

September 27 ••• PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U • PS3 • 360

The idea of a toys-to-life mashup isn't new in a post-Disney Infinity world, but Traveller's Tales stirs the pot more vigorously than ever. Characters from Dr. Who, Scooby-Doo, The Simpsons, The Hobbit, and other big names mingle as minifigures, with universe-bending results. Buying real Lego toys as add-ons can be expensive, but they serve double duty as toys you might actually play with

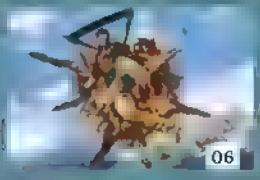




NBA 2K16

September 29 ••• PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

Whether in real-life sports or video games, finding the complete player is rare, but that's NBA 2K16. From improved passing and team-based A.I. strategies to a deeper MyGM mode (with team relocation) and improved server stability, this isn't just a case of tweaking parts to make a whole; it's the elevation of basketball games and the sports genre in total



Square Enix

The Beginner's Guide

October 1 • PC

No game invites players into the complexities of the creator's mind like Davey Wreden does in The Beginner's Guide. Using his friend Coda's designs, he narrates the challenging relationship that can surface between the designer and his work. In the end, you see neuroses, self doubt, and depression all unfold in a chilling finale that's as unsettling as it is thought-provoking

Rock Band 4

October 6 • PS4 • Xbox One

The band got back together this year, and we couldn't be happier to rock out with yet another excellent Harmonix-curated setlist. Keyboards are no longer part of the equation, but the addition of freestyle guitar solos and freeform vocal harmonization lends creativity to the mix. Even better, many of your favorite songs from the previous Rock Band games make the transition.

Transformers: Devastation

October 6 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

You're not the only one who loves the '80s. Platinum Games has a soft spot for the decade, and Transformers: Devastation is proof. This highly stylized action game features stunning cartoon visuals, high-speed action, weapon upgrades, and skyscraper-leveling boss battles. Transformers: Devastation hits fans with a Devastator-sized blast from the past.

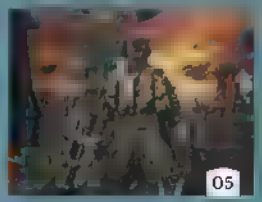
TOP 10 DEVELOPERS

Blizzard

CD Projekt RED

Bungie

Nintendo



From Software

Jackbox Party Pack 2

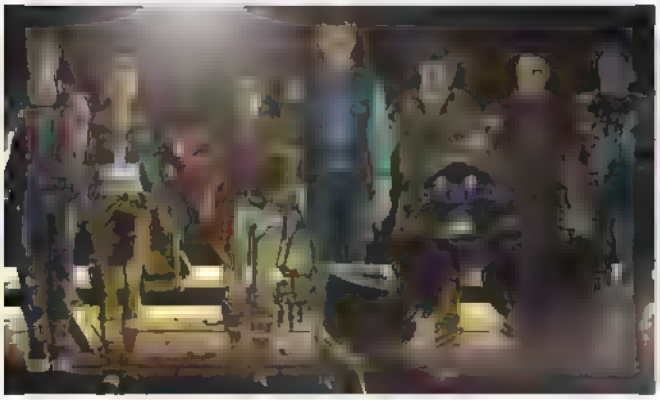
October 13 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • PC • Mac

One of the biggest barriers for playing local party games is a lack of controllers. The geniuses at Jackbox solve that problem by letting up to eight players use smartphones to partake in hilarious games. Test your wit against your friends with 100 new Quiplash prompts, or try your hand at deadly group bomb disposal. Jackbox Party Pack 2 is a surefire route to busting a gut with friends.

Yoshi's Woolly World

October 16 • Wii U

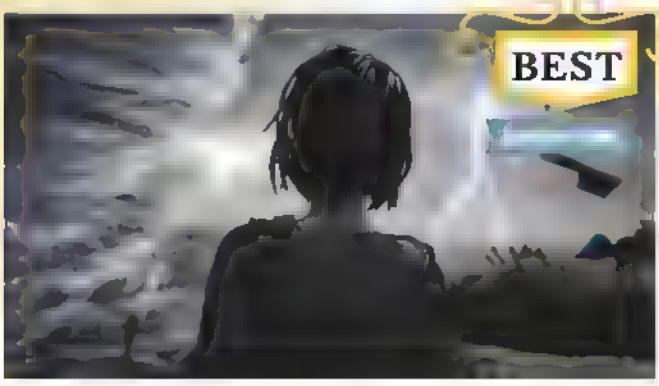
Yoshi blasted out of the gate with his own dedicated game in 1995 on Super Nintendo, and Woolly World recalls that classic formula in both direct references and great platforming gameplay. Throw in some of the best visuals on the Wii U, and Woolly World is destined to be remembered as Yoshi's best solo outing since the 16-bit era.



Tales From The Borderlands

October 20 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS • Android

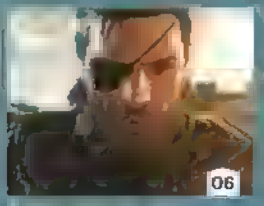
Tales From The Borderlands is Telltale Games' best episodic effort this year. Thanks to witty dialogue, the gallery of sympathetic rogues are just as likely to pull your heartstrings as they are to wrestle chuckles from you. With interesting choices and a satisfying finale, this sci-fi caper is aimed at anyone who likes a good story - not just Borderlands fans.



Life Is Strange

October 20 • PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

Life is dramatic enough as a teenager, even if you aren't equipped with reality altering powers. Dontnod wonderfully captures the mundane details of small town life on the eve of an apocalyptic event through the time-altering powers of Max Caulfield. She solves a mystery with her best friend, Chloe, but also navigates complex relationships (and faces the consequences) along the way.



Assassin's Creed Syndicate

October 23 • PS4 • Xbox One • PC

We all know the Assassin's Creed formula by now, but Syndicate revitalizes it. Deviously creative assassinations give careful players a satisfying payoff, and a revamped skill system lets you play to your strengths as siblings Jacob and Evie Frye. Best of all, navigating Victorian-era London is fun and easy thanks to your new zipline. If Unity let you down last year, give Syndicate a shot.

Civilization Beyond Earth: Rising Tide

October 24 • PC • Mac

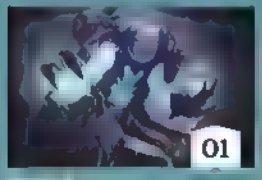
Rising Tide changes many features of the original Civilization: Beyond Earth, with a massive revamped diplomacy system that makes interacting with your opponents a real treat for the silver-tongued. Plus, players get even more strategic depth with the addition of water-based colonies, new unit and construction options, and and artifact system that keeps things fresh from game to game.

Halo 5: Guardians

October 27 • Xbox One

The Master Chief has gone rogue, and a new team of Spartans is in pursuit. Not all is as it seems in the latest Halo adventure, which uses high-octane cutscenes and mobility-centric gameplay to lend a sense of power and speed to the explosive science-fiction universe. And that's before you even dive into the robust new maps, modes, and character customization waiting in the competitive scene.

TOP 10 GAMES AS SERVICES



Hearthstone

new ways to play

The Room Three

November 5 ··· OS

The Room Three takes everything that made the first two games great and expands on their concepts with a series of interconnected puzzle rooms and multiple endings. It has a unique and creepy atmosphere, and the various gadgets and gizmos invite players to use their touchscreens in a variety of interesting ways.

Call of Duty: Black Ops 3

November 6 ··· PS4 • Xbox One • PS3 • 360 • PC

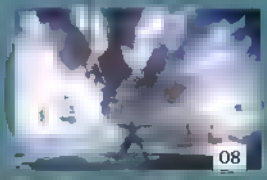
Treyarch's fourth Call of Duty outing is bleak and provocative, with a suspenseful campaign that has players pondering the meaning of reality and whether they can trust anyone. The robust multiplayer of previous entries is made stronger thanks to a new racing mode and the addition of specialist classes that let players turn enemies into fine paste with unique weapons and technology.

Fallout 4

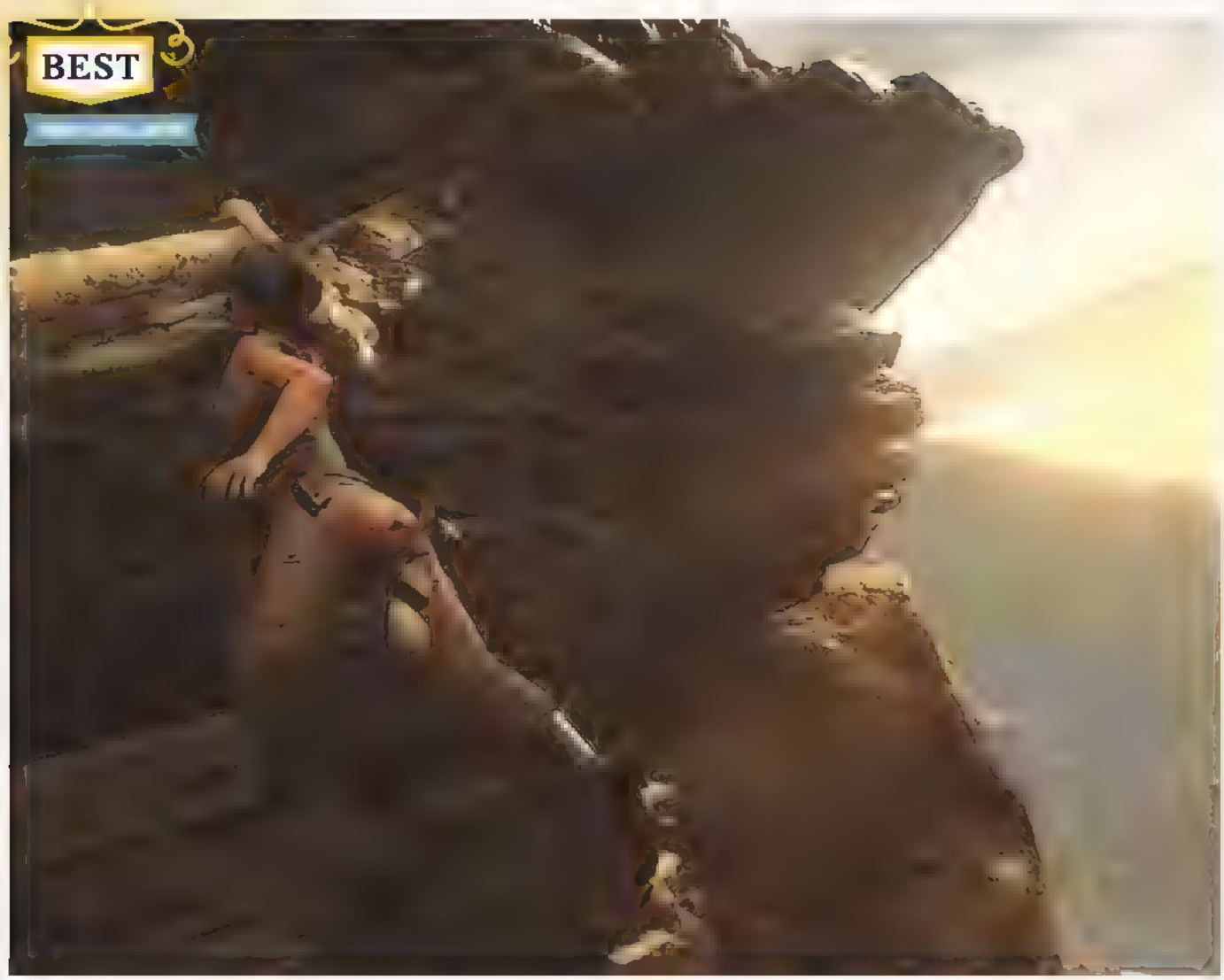
November 10 ··· PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Some gamers have criticized Fallout 4 for feeling more like Fallout 3.5, but describing a game as a bigger and better version of one of the most beloved titles of last generation is hardly an insult. In-depth weapon customization, improved companions, and a more detailed wasteland are among the many solid enhancements that have us celebrating the apocalypse again.

World of Warcraft



Path of Exile

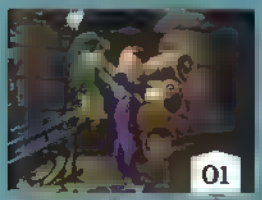


Rise Of The Tomb Raider

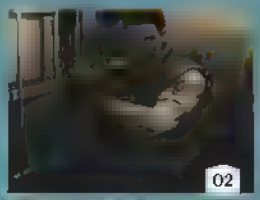
November 10 ••• Xbox One • 360

Rise of the Tomb Raider is an even bigger adrenaline rush than its predecessor. Crystal Dynamics ratchets up the suspense, crafts a larger world, and focuses on making tombs a more exciting part of Lara Croft's adventures. Lara is no longer the naive explorer she once was, equipped with an arsenal of fun skills that make playing as her as thrilling as ever.

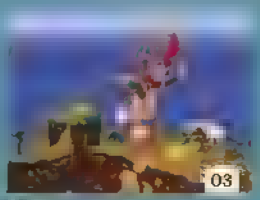
TOP 10 REMASTERS

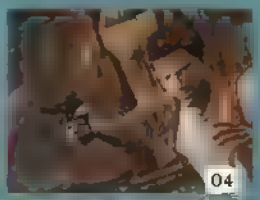


Majora's Mask 3D



HD Remaster





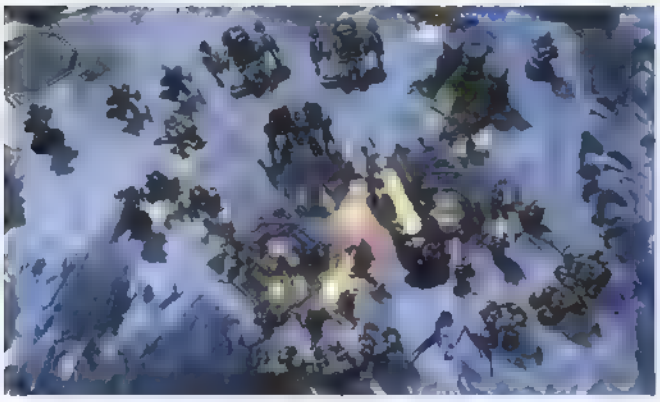
Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection

Xbox 360 owners who gravitated

Borderlands: The Handsome Collection

The lack of the original Border-

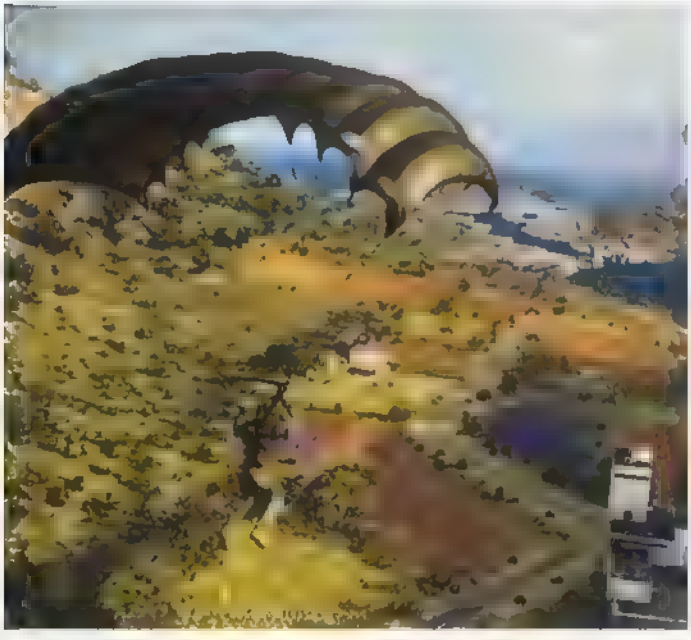
multiplayer is nothing to scoff at

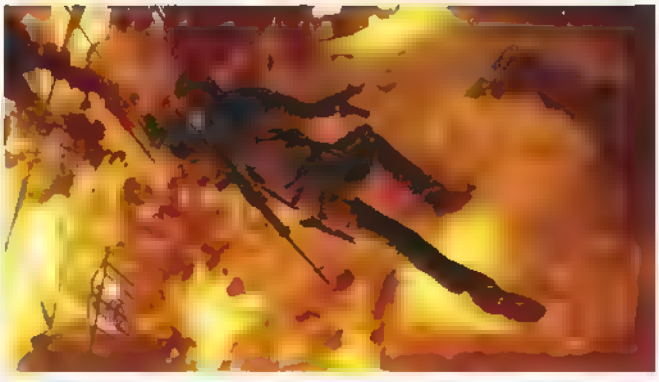


StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void

November 10 ···PC • Mac

The StarCraft II trilogy comes to an end with the standalone Legacy of the Void, featuring a robust Protoss single-player campaign and an epilogue to resolve the fate of the core characters. In addition to the campaign, multiplayer has received a massive boost with Archon mode, co-op missions, daily and weekly tournaments, and new units.



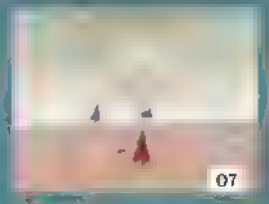


Just Cause 3

December 1 ···PS4 • Xbox One • PC

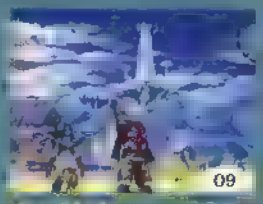
Players who just want to watch the world burn can stop looking. Just Cause 3's explosive action lets Rico turn the most mundane base takeovers into impromptu set-piece moments. Armed with an improved grapple and wingsuit, Rico gives players a tremendous amount of freedom as they liberate the nation of Medici from its oppressive rule – one beautifully rendered explosion at a time.

Homeworld Remastered



Journey

Devil May Cry: Definitive Edition



Xenoblade Chronicles (3DS)

Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition

EDITOR TOP 10 PICKS

Andy McNamara

01	**Destiny: The Taken King**
02	Bloodborne
03	World of Warcraft
04	Batman: Arkham Knight
05	Rise of the Tomb Raider
06	The Room Three
07	You Must Build a Boat
08	Axiom Verge
09	The Beginner's Guide
10	Tales from the Borderlands

Andrew Reiner

01	**The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**
02	Batman: Arkham Knight
03	Ori and the Blind Forest
04	Bloodborne
05	Until Dawn
06	Super Mario Maker
07	Metal Gear Solid V The Phantom Pain
08	Fallout 4
09	Life is Strange
10	Just Cause 3

Matt Bertz

01	**The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**
02	Fallout 4
03	NBA 2K16
04	Destiny: The Taken King
05	Life is Strange
06	Until Dawn
07	Rise of the Tomb Raider
08	Assassin's Creed Syndicate
09	Soma
10	The Beginner's Guide

Joe Juba

01	**Axiom Verge**
02	Metal Gear Solid V The Phantom Pain
03	Life is Strange
04	Assassin's Creed Syndicate
05	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
06	Bloodborne
07	Until Dawn
08	Undertale
09	Soma
10	Ori and the Blind Forest

Matt Miller

01	**Destiny: The Taken King**
02	Bloodborne
03	Assassin's Creed Syndicate
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05	Axiom Verge
06	Batman: Arkham Knight
07	Rock Band 4
08	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
09	Rise of the Tomb Raider
10	Halo 5: Guardians

Tim Turi

01	**Bloodborne**
02	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
03	Super Mario Maker
04	Fallout 4
05	Resident Evil Revelations 2
06	Destiny: The Taken King
07	Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate
08	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
09	Undertale
10	Until Dawn

Kim Wallace

01	**The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**
02	Rise of the Tomb Raider
03	Until Dawn
04	Yoshi's Woolly World
05	NBA 2K16
06	Undertale
07	The Beginner s Guide
08	Life is Strange
09	Soma
10	Tales from the Borderlands

Michael Futter

01	**The Room Three**
02	Bloodborne
03	Tales from the Borderlands
04	Life is Strange
05	Fallout 4
06	Batman: Arkham Knight
07	Soma
08	You Must Build a Boat
09	Rise of the Tomb Raider
10	Ori and the Blind Forest

Daniel Tack

01	**Bloodborne**
02	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
03	Undertale
04	Heroes of the Storm
05	Dota 2
06	Smite
07	Destiny: The Taken King
08	Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate
09	Ori and the Blind Forest
10	Call of Duty: Black Ops III

Matthew Kato

01	**Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain**
02	Fallout 4
03	Life is Strange
04	Pro Evolution Soccer 2016
05	Madden NFL 16
06	Dirt Rally
07	Her Story
08	Assassin's Creed Syndicate
09	FIFA 16
10	Star Wars Battlefront

Jeff Cork

01	**The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**
02	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
03	Life is Strange
04	Rise of the Tomb Raider
05	Rocket League
06	Batman: Arkham Knight
07	Bloodborne
08	Soma
09	Fallout 4
10	Earth Defense Force 4.1: The Shadow of New Despair

Ben Reeves

01	**The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**
02	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
03	Batman: Arkham Knight
04	Axiom Verge
05	Rise of the Tomb Raider
06	Destiny: The Taken King
07	Fallout 4
08	Box Boy
09	Ori and the Blind Forest
10	Soma

Jeff Marchiafava

01	**Fallout 4**
02	Bloodborne
03	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
04	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
05	Dying Light
06	Axiom Verge
07	Helldivers
08	Until Dawn
09	Just Cause 3
10	TIS-100

Kyle Hilliard

01	**Batman: Arkham Knight**
02	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
03	Rise of the Tomb Raider
04	The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D
05	You Must Build a Boat
06	Ori and the Blind Forest
07	Broken Age
08	Until Dawn
09	Just Cause 3
10	Yoshi's Woolly World

Brian Shea

01	**Batman: Arkham Knight**
02	Fallout 4
03	Super Mario Maker
04	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
05	Assassin's Creed Syndicate
06	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
07	Splatoon
08	Mortal Kombat X
09	Yoshi's Woolly World
10	Rise of the Tomb Raider

Javy Gwaltney

01	**Tales from the Borderlands**
02	Soma
03	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
04	Until Dawn
05	Bloodborne
06	Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain
07	Rocket League
08	Mortal Kombat X
09	Cibele
10	Steamworld Heist

Ben Hanson

01	**Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain**
02	Rocket League
03	Jackbox Party Pack 2
04	Destiny: The Taken King
05	Batman: Arkham Knight
06	Splatoon
07	StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void
08	Her Story
09	Undertale
10	Cities: Skylines

Wade Wojcik

01	**Destiny: The Taken King**
02	The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
03	Until Dawn
04	The Legend of Zelda Majora's Mask 3D
05	Soma
06	StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void
07	Halo 5: Guardians
08	Ori and the Blind Forest
09	Super Mario Maker
10	Star Wars Battlefront

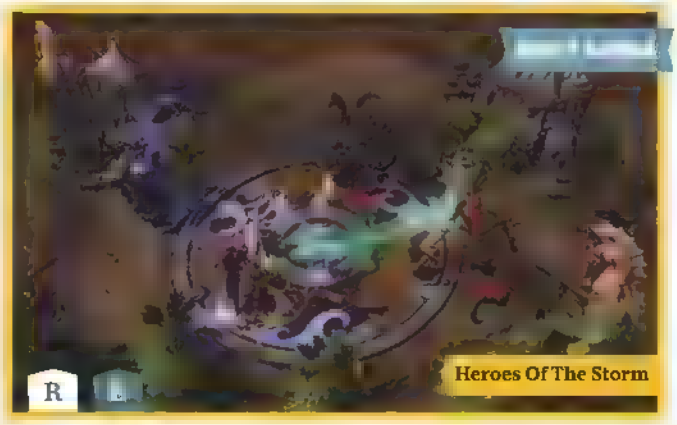
The 2015 Reader & Editor Games Of The Year

Destiny. The Taken King
R

Bloodborne

Metal Gear Solid V Phantom Pain
R

Super Mario Maker
R


Heroes Of The Storm
R

Rocket League
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The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D
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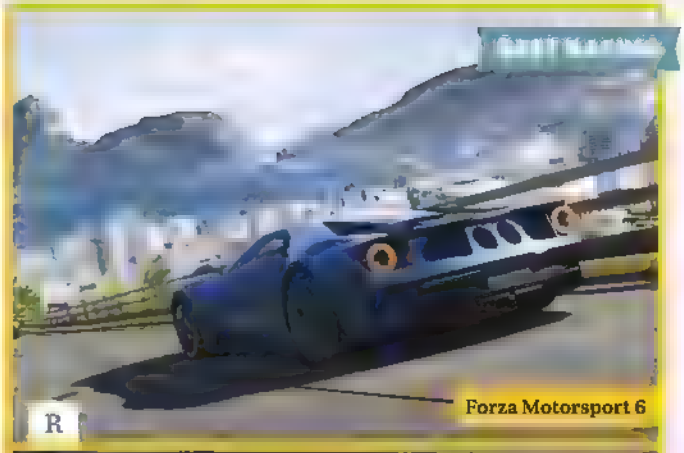
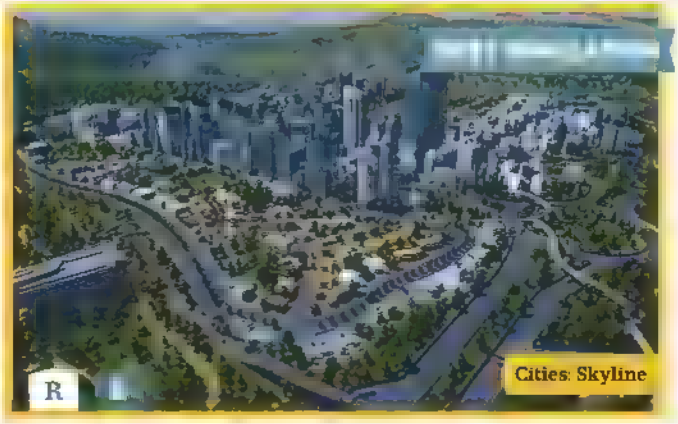
Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate


Forza Motorsport 6
R

Dirt Rally

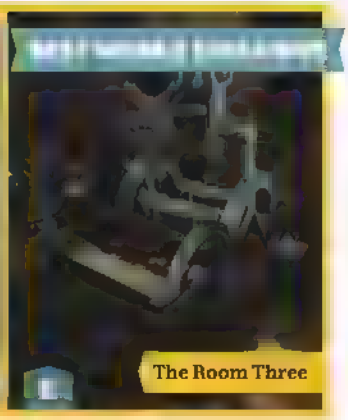
Call Of Duty: Black Ops III
R

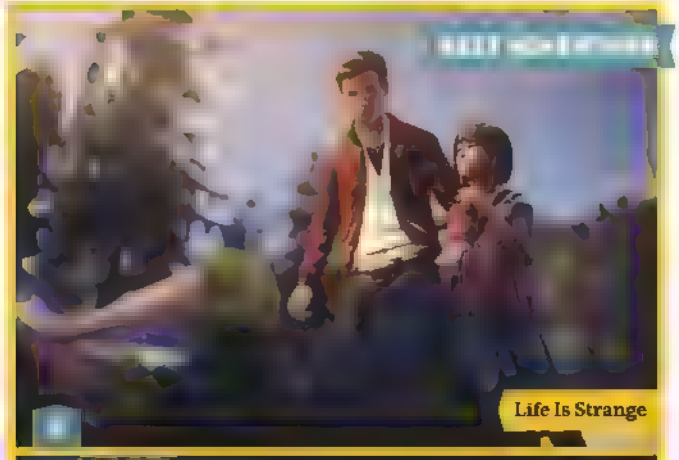
Heroes Of The Storm

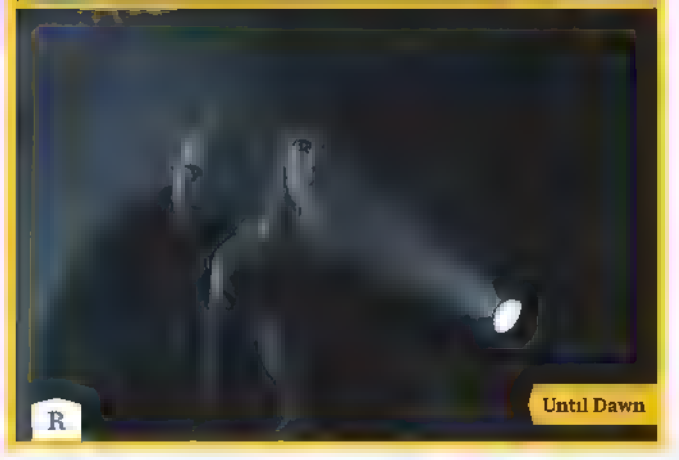

Cities: Skyline
R

Mortal Kombat X
R

Fallout Shelter
R


The Room Three


Life Is Strange


Until Dawn
R

Lara Croft Go
R

Box Boy

Star Wars: The Old Republic Knights Of The Fallen Empire
R

Final Fantasy XIV Heavensward

Rock Band 4
R

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ASSOCIATE SPOTLIGHT

Michaeline / AK

What is your all-time favorite game and why?
I would have to say my most favorite game series is the Mass Effect trilogy. It is a fantastic blend of a 3rd person shooter and an RPG, which are genres I really enjoy. I absolutely love the characters and the interactions the game creates with those characters. The ability to create your own hero and choose how they interact with the game's environment is the coolest thing ever. Every time a customer is looking for a great series, I almost always recommend Mass Effect.

What impact on gaming do you see Virtual Reality having?
Virtual reality is going to make playing games a lot easier and also allow for different ways to be able to play a game.

In your opinion, what role will indie games play in the future?
Indie games offer a unique, memorable, and fun gaming experience for everyone, there are so many cool ones out there, my favorites are Don't Starve and Braid. I believe indie games will be around in the future.

Are you a collector?
I collect POP! Vinyl figures, amiibos, Magic The Gathering trading cards, and other random plushes and figurines. The biggest things in my collection are the collector's editions of all three Mass Effect games, My Halo 3 and Halo 5 collector's edition, and my 21 inch statue of Garrus from Mass Effect.

Hugo Rodriguez / AK

What is your all-time favorite game and why?
My all-time favorite video game has to be The Last of Us from Naughty Dog. It has been so much fun diving into those worlds and instantly loving all the characters. When I started playing The Last of Us, I was surprised to immediately love the characters and how they developed over time in a post-apocalyptic world. To this day, I haven't felt that same adrenaline rush in any other game.

What new game are you most excited for and why?
I'm looking forward to King of Fighters 14 and Street Fighter 5.

What's in your console right now?
Right now, there's Destiny in my Destiny themed PS4. There's Splatoon in my Wii U, there's The Witcher 3 in my Xbox One, Dragons Crown in my PS Vita, and Fire Emblem: Awakening for my Nintendo 3DS.

Which Virtual Reality device are you most excited for?
Definitely the Oculus Rift. It sounds like it'll be very versatile. I haven't had a chance to try it though.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

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For Honor

Capturing the thrill of swordfighting

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft

Release
TBA

When For Honor was announced at E3, I wasn't sure what to make of it, but I knew the man on stage presenting it, creative director Jason VandenBerghe, had a lot of passion for a game that casts you in the middle of epic swordfights. After playing through a competitive multiplayer match at PSX, I caught up with VandenBerghe to discover more about For Honor and was pleased to find his enthusiasm hasn't faded in the slightest.

For VandenBerghe, the concept behind For Honor has been a long dream in the making. "The ideas behind this game have their origin in my life-long fascination with this art form... with the combat as an art in general," VandenBerghe says. "I mean I'm that kind of geek; I'm a weapon fighter. I've [studied this] my whole life." But the idea didn't start brewing until he took a class in Western martial arts, which is a rediscovered form of longsword fighting that the Warden hero uses in For Honor. "I started thinking about controls and how it would feel to make a video game that made me feel the way I feel when I have a sword in my hand," VandenBerghe says.

It sounds simple, but it was a hard idea for people to wrap their heads around. Think about it – a competitive game that has the depth and modes of a shooter, where the swordfighting is more than mashing buttons. If you don't understand swordfighting, you don't get why that's exciting. I didn't grasp how that was intriguing until I got my hands on the game for a match.

In For Honor, you always need to keep your stance in mind. You want to succeed at parrying attacks. To do this, you want to take a left, right, or high stance depending on the incoming strike's direction, but you also want to throw off your opponent with heavy and light attacks in a direction different from your stance. Mind you, while you're doing this, chaos is erupting on the battlefield and you have to make sure you're succeeding at the larger objectives, depending on the mode you're playing. Ubisoft saw the promise of this dynamic, and VandenBerghe has been refining his idea for the past three and a half years with people on its staff who have worked on the fighting mechanics in games from the Naruto and Prince of Persia series.

For Honor comes with a single-player mode, which just like most shooters means a story campaign. Although Ubisoft isn't discussing that narrative yet, it is working to create an interesting and fun explanation for the For Honor fiction, because obviously knights, samurai, and vikings didn't actually fight in our history. "This is not a historical game, but it's pieces of history put together in a different order," VandenBerghe says. "The goal is to create a campaign that's a satisfying enough and a full experience, even if you don't want to indulge in the multiplayer."

Beyond the campaign, For Honor has competitive multiplayer, co-op, and splitscreen. Multiplayer has various modes, but Ubisoft has only announced Dominion mode, which has you fighting to control capture zones. VandenBerghe says there are two main areas for progression in multiplayer. The first is the feats, which are four abilities that unlock over time as you

succeed in a match (like by getting killstreaks), such as a catapult strike and the ability to reinforce your soldiers around you.

The other big part of the multiplayer experience is that your gear comes with stat variability; so while you can customize it, you can also do some fine-tuning to improve it. But VandenBerghe makes it clear that it's not about making your character stronger by playing more. "It's about letting you tune and change how you want to play your character," he says.

In addition, you can customize your character as you wish with different armor and weapons. The game has three factions for to choose from: the knights, the vikings, and the samurai. Within each group, multiple "heroes" have different weapons, armor, and play styles, even though at present only one has been announced for each faction. "We've got a lot more coming," VandenBerghe says. "Each one will play differently enough that you'll have your favorites that you want to master because it suits how you want to play, but they're close enough that it's kind of one set of skills. You're learning how to fight in For Honor and then there are variations inside of that. Each hero will have a slightly different mechanic."

I played as the Warden, a knight hero, who has three different stances and lock and guard break mechanics. VandenBerghe says the Oni, a samurai hero, has a different blocking style where they don't hold their stances. "Their block stance lasts about half a second, so you have to anticipate a little bit more and it's more challenging to block, but they do more damage," VandenBerghe says. "They're an aggressive, faster character that relies on dodging, quick strikes, and combos whereas the Warden has higher defense and more reach."

The biggest goal for For Honor is to make sure every weapon feels differently when you wield it, adding variety and authenticity to the experience. "My goal from the beginning is that I really want to make this game for anyone with a swordfighting fantasy," VandenBerghe says. "I feel like this game has been missing."

VandenBerghe's right to an extent; something about being on that battlefield made me feel the intense competition that I do when I play a shooter that I've never felt with a sword in my hands before in a video game. I just hope the game can continue that thrill I felt from my one match and doesn't become stale. VandenBerghe is aware of that challenge, which is why the team has already started consulting people by having closed alphas. "Variety is the most important thing," VandenBerghe says, which is why the game is offering numerous heroes, modes, and even options on the battlefield for how you want to play. For now, all we can do is wait for Ubisoft to unveil more heroes and modes to get a better idea of the game.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Midgar in pieces

» PlayStation 4 • TBA

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

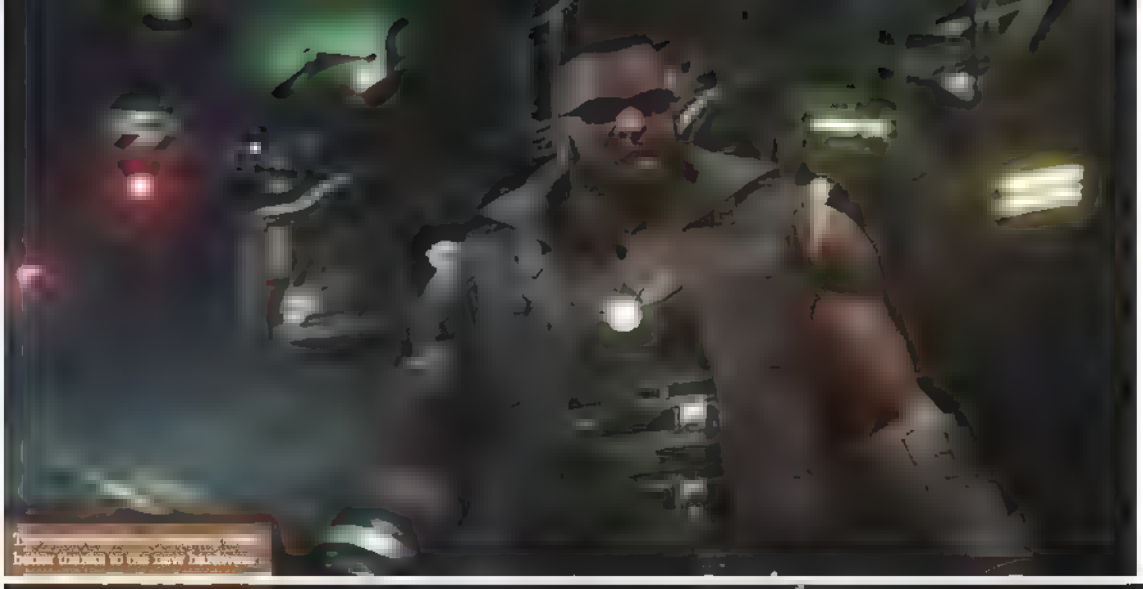
» TBA

The remake of Final Fantasy VII was first announced at E3 2015 in a reveal that seemed too good to be true. After years of rumors and disappointments, many fans had given up hope of seeing a new version of the classic RPG. However, that confirmation from Sony and Square Enix was just the beginning. At the recent PlayStation Experience, the two companies once again teamed up to showcase Final Fantasy VII Remake and provide new details.

We knew to expect some changes, but the latest trailer demonstrates more than just the graphical differences of the remake. It features a familiar background – the iconic train platform seen at the beginning of the original – but the events unfold in a brand new way. As Cloud and Barrett engage in combat with Shinra troops, we see that the battle system isn't strictly turn-based. Instead, it employs a fusion of real-time action and command selection. However, familiar elements like the Summon option and a Limit Break meter are still visible in the interface. The footage also shows Cloud running through an apparently open-world version of Midgar, hinting that players will be able to move freely around the dark and oppressive city.

While speculating about the gameplay changes is fun, the biggest surprise surrounding the new version is Square Enix's announcement that it will be a multi-part undertaking. Before you assume that means it will be broken up into quarterly installments like Telltale's adventure games, remember that Final Fantasy XIII was also technically a multi-part saga. Though Square Enix hasn't revealed how many installments Final Fantasy VII Remake will span, according to producer Yoshinori Kitase, each part will have the scope of a full game. At least fans don't need to panic about the game being released in two-hour chunks.

Even so, this approach is still confusing. After all, Final Fantasy VII was just a single game before – why does it need to be more now? In a blog post on Square Enix's site, Kitase addresses this question by explaining the rationale behind the decision. "It's a massive undertaking to reconstruct Final Fantasy VII from the ground up with the current

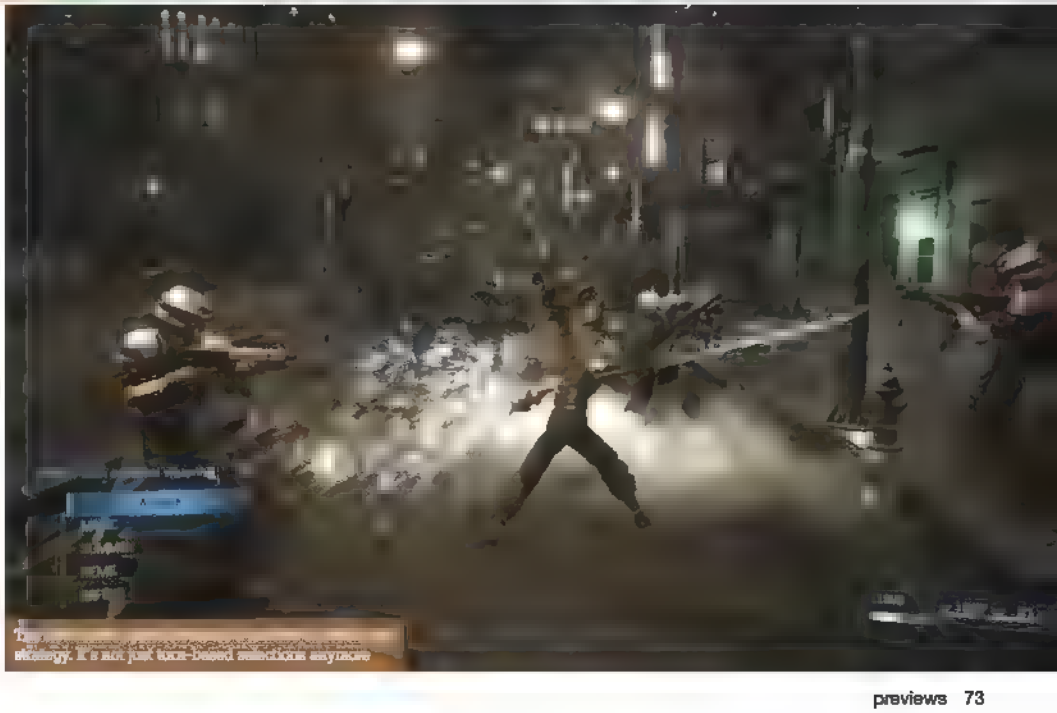


Even though the Final Fantasy VII remake has been shown exclusively on Sony's stage until now, the game is only "debuting" on the PlayStation 4. That specific wording implies that the title could eventually come to other platforms (like Xbox One). That same language was used to describe Rise of the Tomb Raider's Xbox One supposed exclusivity, Lara Croft's latest adventure is still coming to PS4, albeit a full year later.

Due to the expanded story, the lesser-known members of AVALANCHE will get more time in the spotlight

technology," Kitase writes. "Producing a proper HD remake of Final Fantasy VII that maintains the same feeling of density of the original would result in a volume of content that couldn't possibly fit into one installment." In short, the remake still tells the same story, but will be deeper and spread over multiple games.

When it released on the original PlayStation in 1997, Final Fantasy VII transformed the role-playing landscape. The polygonal character models were capable of showing off a wide range of emotions, the vast 3D world was a joy to explore, and hard-won boss fights resulted in jaw-dropping cinematic cutscenes. All of these elements shaped the genre's evolution in the years that followed, but Final Fantasy VII seems primitive today. By starting over from scratch with modern technology, Square Enix is hoping to reinvigorate the classic story of Final Fantasy VII, bringing in fans new and old. » **Joe Juba**



Lego Marvel's Avengers

Building your dream Marvel army to traverse iconic locales

Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Vita
3DS • PC

Style
1 or 2-Player Action

Publisher
WB Games

Developer
TT Games

Release
January 26

You don't have to go far these days to be bombarded with superheroes or hear the word "Marvel." The Disney subsidiary's creations are an iconic part of pop culture, and fans continue to be enamored with these characters. That's part of what makes Traveller's Tales' Lego Marvel's Avengers so exciting. This team captures the love and detail of these beloved heroes, packing in as much content and fun nods to the franchises as possible. With its release date in view, we saw the game in action one last time and were impressed by how it is shaping up.

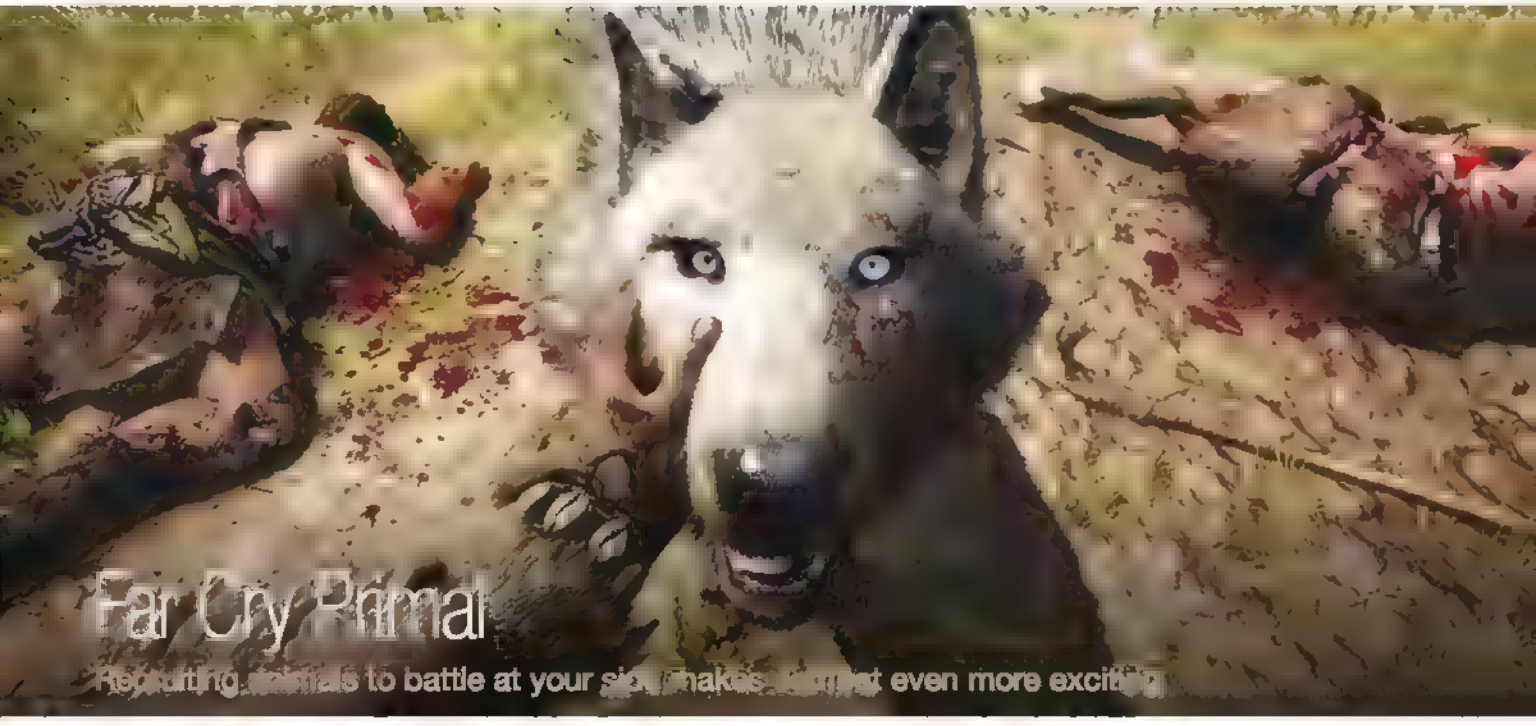
The story mode focuses on the *Age of Ultron* film and stars Quicksilver, Scarlet Witch, Vision, and Ultron. Here, they fight through iconic locations and in high-action battles from the Marvel films and universe, such as the infamous battle in New York against charismatic villain Loki from the first Avengers movie. The story blends both movies, but locations and scenes won't be restricted to just the main films; expect to also see content from *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and some trademark Lego humor for good measure.

Outside of story mode, seven different hub worlds exist for you to explore: South Africa, Malibu, Asgard, Barton Farm, Sokovia, Washington, D.C., and Shield Exterior. Each can be traversed with various vehicles from the Marvel universe, such as the Mooncopter, Thanos-Copter, and Lola (the 1962 Corvette from *Agents of SHIELD*). Certain characters have special quest lines; for instance, Ashley Johnson came in and recorded new dialogue for Beth the Waitress-specific quests. In addition to the quests, you can participate in races, prevent crimes, and solve puzzles suited to characters and their special abilities.

The amount and variety of playable characters is impressive. Lego Marvel's Avengers has over 200 characters to unlock, ranging from the frequent allies like Iron Man and Hulk to more obscure characters like Captain Britain and Fin Fang Foom. You can unlock Stan Lee again, too, who has a bow with one big pencil for his arrow since he's a writer. Thanks to tons of Twitter requests, Superior Iron Man is in the game. Multiple versions of iconic heroes can also be unlocked as well. For instance, you can be Lou Ferrigno's '80s Hulk or the original, android Human Torch. Every character has his or her own special, fun abilities. For example, Fin Fang Foom can be scaled up, so you can stomp through towns like you're Godzilla, and Quicksilver is so fast he can run on water and produce copies of himself.

For those who thought Lego Marvel Super Heroes delivered, Lego Marvel's Avengers looks even better and grander. Traveller's Tales is constantly out to make every game better than its last, and we can't wait to get our hands on the final release.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



Far Cry Primal

Recruiting animals to battle at your side makes combat even more exciting

From the Himalayas to tropical islands, Far Cry has tasked you with surviving in breathtaking landscapes, but none have been as primitive or surprising as Ubisoft's decision to set its new entry in the Stone Age. Forget guns or cars. You're going back to the basics to make it through this adventure, which actually affords more unique opportunities than you'd think. Recently, I got my hands on the game and was surprised by how much the atmosphere and era bolster the experience.

You play as Takkar, the last survivor of his hunting group, which makes you vulnerable prey for other primates on the prowl. The demo throws me straight into the open world with one main mission marked on the map – an enemy outpost to conquer. Before I head off for it, I roam the grasslands, seeing other hunters and animals in the distance.

The most promising feature and my favorite part of the demo is the ability to tame animals and have them assist you in battle. You can recruit anything from a jaguar to a bear. You begin the game with merely an owl at your side, but the owl can guide you toward important resources in the environment, lighting them up as it spots them from above. All the animals you recruit have special skills like this, such as wolves who alert you of incoming danger. You can only bring one animal with you at a time and can swap with a click of the button when you bring up your animal wheel.

After using the owl to find some crafting materials, I decide to keep it simple and summon a wolf to my side. I spot some jaguars roaming the area, and throwing out meat in their vicinity gets me one step closer to recruitment. The tricky part of this is you have to time this right, animals constantly move and you need to get it in their line of sight for a creature to take notice. I stumble a few more times than I expect.

After messing around in the fields with my club and trusty bow and arrow – the latter is by far the way to hunt – I head off to the outpost. While in the demo, I can only travel by foot, the game will also have other means of transporting across the land, such as riding on the backs of woolly mammoths and sabretooth tigers.

I expect my bow to be deadly and the ideal way to take down enemies from afar, but that strategy soon fails me when the arrows do little damage to my opponents guarding the outpost. The bow alerts them to my presence and tribesmen charge at me. Reacting on the fly I melee them with my club, which is highly effective. I'm even more impressed with how well my animal recruits assist me in battle. For the first portion, I have my wolf at my side, which gives me a heads up when enemies are drawing near, but later I swap to my jaguar, who is a master at stealth attacks. At one point as I turn around after defeating an enemy, I see my jaguar blindside attack a foe from behind that was rushing my way. The whole experience is over in a matter of a few minutes, but it's still a rush to see how animals enhance the experience.

Primal still hasn't shown off its full bag of tricks. You can also build your own tribe and learn skills to lead your people, but this wasn't present in my brief demo and Ubisoft isn't talking about how the mechanics work yet. However, if this feature makes battles as unpredictable and entertaining as they were with critters at my side, I doubt I'll miss my gun. In fact, this change just might reinvigorate the series, forcing you to strategize and approach combat in new, delightful ways. Time will tell.

» Kimberley Wallace

Battle rivals at the war to survive

Publisher
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft

Release
February 23
(PS4, Xbox One)
March 1 (PC)

Paragon

Bringing Epic's signature action to a new frontier

» **Platforms**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player MOBA
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Epic Games

» **Developer**
Epic Games

» **Release**
2016

Epic Games has already made its mark on the action and shooter genres with series like Gears of War and Unreal Tournament, but now it looks to make the leap to another genre with Paragon. Though the game shares much with other games in the MOBA genre, Epic hopes to overcome several of the common pitfalls by putting its own spin on the genre.

Rather than taking the top-down approach common with MOBAs, Epic Games is putting players right in the middle of the action – something that Hi-Rez Studios successfully did with Smite. The three-dimensional approach to gameplay enables Epic to do what it does best: create compelling action.

A MOBA can have all of the best mechanics in place, but if the characters aren't memorable or don't play well with each other, it can have serious implications for the game. Epic is working to include a diverse set of characters that have different abilities. The number of playable characters is still up in the air, but Epic says it plans to follow an aggressive plan for rolling out new characters.

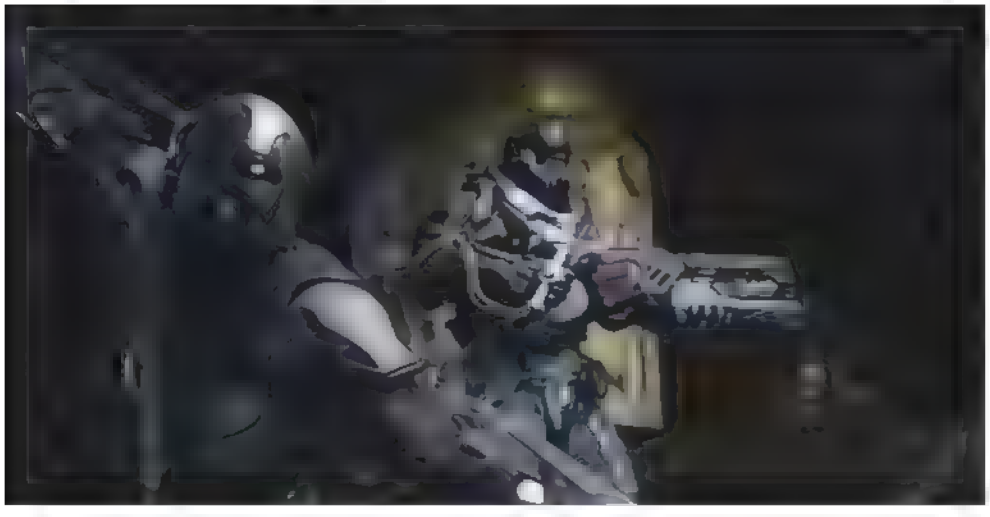
Characters deliver a greater sense of progression, as they are leveled up over the course of matches, in addition to a card system that allows players to make different choices for the direction they take when leveling. The card system adds a layer of strategy, as you can see how your opponents are building their decks and adapt your strategies on the fly to counter developing situations.

As characters develop, they learn to use various special mobility skills. Though some characters can leap or soar over the crowd of combatants, they must be careful, as Epic has included many characters that can shoot airborne characters down with projectiles. These types of exchanges have the potential to create some awesome moments.

To show off its action, Epic Games is including the ability to craft replays. The team wants to allow players to not only recreate the cool moments developers often show in trailers for MOBAs, but also create their own highlight reels. Any captured footage is editable and shareable within the game itself.

The footage looks great. In fact, one video shown to us played a lot like a trailer, but the team later revealed that it was made using the built-in tools. If the community latches on to this feature, it could be a great place to share your biggest triumphs or funniest failures.

Paragon will be free-to-play when it launches. Those who want to get their hands on it early can do so during a paid early access period occurring this spring. If you can wait a bit longer, however, Epic is planning a free open beta in the summer. » **Brian Shea**



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

Hands-on with the multiplayer beta

Uncharted has featured multiplayer since the second entry, but it's often felt like an ancillary mode. After getting our hands on Uncharted 4's multiplayer beta and experimenting with its unique multiplayer aspects for nearly a week, we discovered that this multiplayer experience has a few standout features that could turn this mode into more than just a bullet point on the back of the box.

In Uncharted 4's team deathmatch, notable icons from the series such as Nathan, Sully, and Elena, duke it out with other players controlling series baddies, such as Katherine Marlow and Lazarevic. The grapple hook, which is featured heavily in the single-player campaign, is also a prominent fixture in multiplayer. We had a lot of fun swinging through mountainside shanty towns and tropical jungles, and even using the grapple hook to get the drop on our foes.

Using an in-game currency you acquire by taking down enemies or wandering around the map and collecting artifacts, you can deploy a series of special mid-game items, which range from ammo resupplies and heavy weapon drops to NPC allies. These sidekicks come in a variety of flavors, including eagle-eyed snipers who will defend a specific location, heavily armored brutes, and field medics who revive your companions.

Another new set of deployable items are called Mysticals. These supernatural artifacts have a range of abilities. For example, the Spirit of Djinn imbues players with the ability to teleport short distances, while the Staff of Ayar Manco acts like a radar ping that instantly reveals enemy forces across the map. My favorite is the Wrath of El Dorado, a sarcophagus featured in the original Uncharted. When it is deployed, it unleashes a series of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style spirits that chase down your enemies before exploding. These Mysticals can be switched out along with your loadout, and each one offers a fun bit of chaos that can swing the battle in your favor.

In the past, Uncharted has been criticized for its loose gunplay, and while the controls have tightened up a bit over the years, the action in the beta still feels a little wild. Overall, I still enjoyed Uncharted's frantic online action. Matches move briskly, and it's a lot of fun to sneak up on your foes, since the radar only shows your position while you're firing a weapon.

Uncharted is known for its single-player spectacle and summer blockbuster-level action sequences. That's not going to change, but the improvements Naughty Dog has made to its multiplayer mode means that these multiplayer shootouts may be worth more than just a passing glance.

» **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1–Player Action
(10–Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Naughty Dog

» **Release**
April 26

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

An unexpected return

» [redacted]
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
TBA

Famed animation house Studio Ghibli apparently doesn't know what the word "sequel" means As much as fans want to return to the enchanting worlds in *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Ghibli has always chosen to create new worlds and characters instead When Level-5 teamed up with Ghibli to create the video game, Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch, the assumption from Ghibli fans was that it would be a standalone title that synced up with the studio's film ideology.

At last December's PlayStation Experience expo in Los Angeles, Bandai Namco unveiled Ni no Kuni II Revenant Kingdom, a direct sequel that brings players back into the beloved RPG world filled with monsters and corrupting dark powers. Level-5's name was prominently on display in the trailer, but Studio Ghibli's logo never appeared. Oddly, Bandai Namco won't reveal if Ghibli is actively working on this project, but a representative for the company told us that former Ghibli veterans Yoshiyuki Momose, an animator on *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Whisper of the Heart*, and Joe Hisaishi, the composer of *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Porco Rosso*, are actively working on Revenant Kingdom Momose was the director of animation for Wrath of the White Witch, and Hisaishi the composer While it sounds like Ghibli's direct input isn't here, key members from some of its biggest films are returning to give Revenant Kingdom the Ghibli touch.

In the brief Revenant Kingdom footage released at the expo, we meet two new characters: a boy king named Evan, who reigns over Ding Dong Dell and looks human except for his rabbit-like ears, and Roland, an adult male who appears to have warped from one reality to another much like Oliver from Wrath of the White Witch A coup in the king's palace by a heavily armed rodent army unites Roland and Evan in an escape. The throne is quickly taken by a nefarious-looking ferret who beams "This is the dawn of a new era for all of Ni no Kuni!"

The following clips reveal that Roland stays in this reality to help Evan regain his kingdom We also see Evan united with other characters, presumably a part of his party. Quick snapshots also show giant, Godzilla-like beasts called "Guardians" destroying cities. "The Guardians are meant to protect things, not destroy them," a girl in the trailer says. Other shots show an evil-looking emperor in a snake mask dabbling in dark magic, and Evan coming into his own as a warrior

No release date has been announced, but Sony says the game is coming exclusively to PlayStation 4. Wrath of the White Witch launched exclusively on PlayStation 3. » **Andrew Reiner**

Ratchet & Clank

Wackiness reimagined

When a video game series is long-running or successful enough, it's only a matter of time before Hollywood starts exploring a film adaptation. While most of the rumored silver screen adaptations don't make it through pre-production, the release of *Ratchet & Clank*, a CG feature film, is right around the corner. To accompany that release, Insomniac is revisiting the first game (upon which the movie is based) and making all that's old new again.

I played three levels of the game-based-on-the-movie-based-on-the-game and found it possesses many of the same quirks that fans expect from the series. Familiar locations like Nebula G34, a remake of a stage from the original game, and Pokitaru, a beachy series mainstay with gorgeous vistas, make appearances, but so do new locales. During my demo, I traveled to Aleero City, a metropolis with an enemy-infested train that I used to travel across part of the level and fight baddies. Each stage is beautifully rendered, taking advantage of the new power as the first entry of the series to appear on PlayStation 4.

Even more impressive, however, is how awesome the character models look. I was constantly in awe of the lighting and the way the characters glistened, with the most impressive being my boss encounter. In Nebula G34 I faced off against Snagg beast, who had previously appeared in the original game. This time, however, he's bigger and badder. With several attacks and maneuvers at his disposal, plus a decent-sized health bar, it took me a while to finish him off, but the battle was a lot of fun and let me use the series' signature array of crazy weapons.

Ratchet & Clank has always featured over-the-top silly weapons, and this entry is no different. From more "normal" weapons like the Predator Launcher rocket gun to the more absurd inclusions, each new armament has a unique feel. Fan favorites like the Groovitron, a weapon that deploys as a disco ball causing all surrounding enemies to stop their assault and dance their ways into damage, and the Pyrocitor, a flamethrower that is devastating at close range, make appearances. However, my personal favorite weapon during the demo was a brand new one.

The Pixelizer is a shotgun-style gun that does significant damage to its target while simultaneously robbing it of its beauty. Any enemy targeted by the Pixelizer ceases to look like a fully-rendered character in a PlayStation 4 game and instead looks more like a character appearing in the original Doom.

In the realm of reboots, Ratchet & Clank looks to do less shaking up of the formula and more modernization. This new version of Ratchet & Clank carries on the traditions of the series while introducing new visuals, weapons, stages, and more. I'm looking forward to seeing what other crazy alterations Insomniac throws my way when the game launches this spring.

» **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Insomniac Games

» **Release**
April 12

Wild

Rayman's creator tries something new

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **[redacted]**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Wild Sheep

» **Release**
2016

Michel Ancel's latest project moves away from the more fantastic worlds of his past games like Rayman Legends and Beyond Good & Evil – but only slightly. Wild is just as magical, but it takes place in our world during the Neolithic era of human evolution, when tools were starting to become widely used and farming was the next big thing. The game is a departure for Ancel professionally as well, who formed a new independent studio, Wild Sheep, for the occasion. He's currently splitting his time 50-50 between Wild Sheep and Ubisoft, which has been his home since 1992.

Ancel says Wild is inspired by his time as a youth exploring nature, and that sense of wonderment shines through. Players take on the role of a shaman who can control or ride the various animals he comes across in the sprawling open world. During a recent demo, Ancel showed the shaman survey the land from the vantage point of a hawk, take control of a rabbit to sneak by an antagonistic tribe undetected, direct a murder of crows to dive-bomb the cannibals as a distraction, and jump on the back of a bear to ambush them.

All of these actions were done in service of tracking down a god who could give the shaman the ability to control snakes, which he needs in order to save a woman in his tribe suffering from a snake bite. He found the god, a beautiful, titan-sized woman with patches of scales all over her skin. The shaman has to prove himself to gods like this to be gifted the ability to control these animals. He commemorates each of these unlockable abilities by adding a tattoo to his body. How he proves himself is a mystery, however, as that's where the demo ended.

Nature is rarely your friend in Wild.

Often in games, nature is as much an enemy as any other combatant. We've killed all manner of wolves, bats, and every other real-world creature during our time with video games, but in Wild the beasts are your tools, required for progression through the game and its world. This is one of Ancel's goals with Wild: to create an environment where players work with nature instead of against it. Your greatest enemies are the other humans of the world, like the cannibals we saw in the demo.

Ancel says the world is roughly the size of Europe, and will change with the seasons and weather patterns. Why so big? When Ancel introduced the game last year he wrote, "When we started working on Wild we wanted to make sure that we would have fun playing our own game even after months and months of development."

Wild doesn't have a release date yet, but Ancel's side project is worth keeping an eye on as it's a different take on the open-world genre, free of technology, advanced weaponry, and wheeled vehicles. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Creator Michel Ancel claims that the massive game world is approximately the size of Europe

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XCOM 2

Losing the war breathes new life into alien hunting

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Games

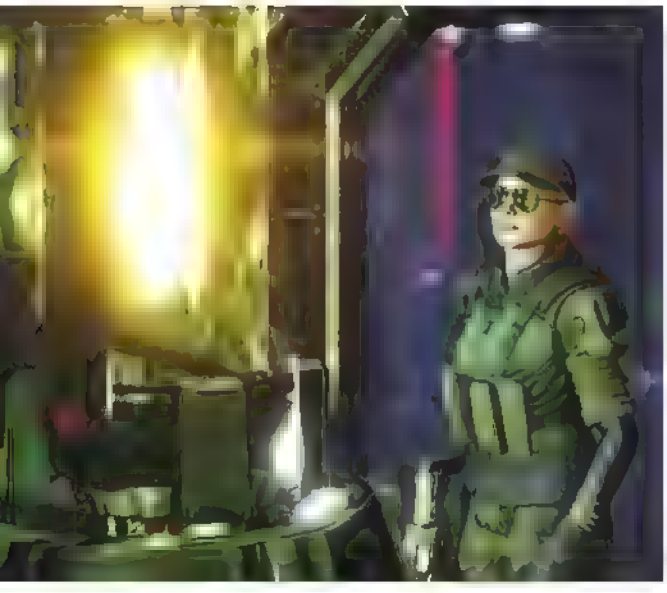
» **Developer**
Firaxis

» **Release**
February 5

What if that XCOM playthrough that killed all the soldiers you designed in friends' images and left you defenseless was the real story? Your base was destroyed, your Sky Rangers shot down, and the planet overrun by invaders. In short, you failed.

XCOM 2 picks up 20 years after that hypothetical defeat. The aliens are now in control, positioning themselves as saviors. They have built clean cities, healed illness, and eliminated most crime. On the surface, these friendly visitors have fixed the problems humanity created over decades of war and planetary plunder.

You know the truth, though. These benefactors are the enemy. XCOM 2 is about leading a resistance movement to take back the planet at all costs.



Firaxis has flipped the series on its head, and so far the sequel to 2012's XCOM: Enemy Unknown seems to be coming together wonderfully. The changes are widespread, with improvements to tactical play and the base-building strategy layer.

We played through three missions, including the opening moments of the game and a later incursion into an alien base. XCOM 2 immediately feels different, as XCOM arrives on the scene under cover of shadows. Each tactical mission begins with soldiers concealed and able to set up an ambush to begin the fireworks.

Multiple units can participate in the opening volley by moving them into position and placing them in overwatch mode. The result can be a decisive blow against overwhelming enemy forces that is fun to watch play out.

Moving under concealment requires soldiers to stay out of sight and carefully navigate the procedurally generated maps. Patrolling Advent troops and turrets often present initial challenges in missions. Aliens, like the new Sectoids spliced with human DNA and Vipers (Thin Men no longer in need of their human-form infiltration disguises), are beefed up to function as tougher, more imposing units. Don't expect even a lone Sectoid to be a pushover this time.

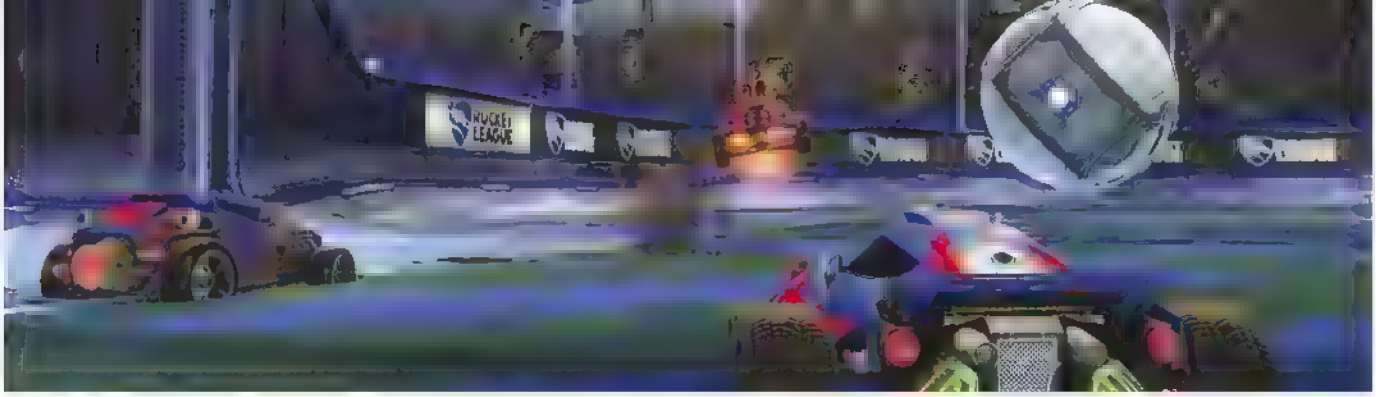
XCOM might be on the run, but it isn't without a new set of tools that make this sequel feel fresh. Once aboard the Avenger, the new mobile base, you can use recovered loot from defeated enemies to craft new ammunition and weapon upgrades. In addition to the two upgrade paths for each class, weapon customization and personal combat sims (stat enhancers) help you further tweak your soldiers' abilities in battle.

You won't find MEC suits or gene mods this time out. Those mechanics from Enemy Within have been integrated in other ways. Exo suits and combat sims replace those features. Combat skills, found in the armory, can increase your squad size, give you increased speed while concealed, buff specific classes, and more. The armory is also where you train rookies to fill specific classes. No longer are you at the mercy of the random number generator to fill out your roster with the soldiers you need.

The pressure is higher this time out. Unlike last time, when the aliens simply sat in a holding pattern near the end of the game, players can't daily. There are "dark events" that you must interrupt and an overarching enemy win condition that can spell instant doom if you waste too much time.

Because this is XCOM, you should expect to lose soldiers often. Thankfully, death isn't quite as inevitable this time out. Players can purchase a combat tactic that yields a better chance of a soldier bleeding out instead of instant death. You can also task an active soldier with carrying an incapacitated ally to the extraction point. All of this results in a greater sense of control and harder decisions under fire.

With mod support and a brisker pace to combat, creative director Jake Solomon tells us that his team is aiming for greater replay value. Maybe next time you'll be able to save those fallen friends. » **Michael Futter**



Rocket League

The surprise arcade sports hit races over to Xbox One

The car-soccer smash Rocket League became an instant sensation on PC and PlayStation 4 when it launched last July. Meanwhile, players on Microsoft's competing console had to watch from the sidelines. That's changing this February, with Rocket League's release on Xbox One.

For developer Psyonix, the delay wasn't meant as a slight. "As soon as the game took off, we started thinking about Xbox," says the studio's CEO and president, Dave Hagewood. "The only reason we didn't do it in the beginning was because we had limited resources; it was a lot for a small team to get out what we did, and we kind of had to choose which console to go first, and we already had an existing audience on Sony, so that made sense."

The Xbox One port includes the latest optimized version of the game and the Supersonic Fury, Revenge of the Battle-Cars, and Chaos Run DLC. Players also gain access to a pair of cars that are exclusive to the platform: a modified Warthog from Halo, the HogSticker, and the Armadillo from Gears of War. The Xbox One version won't support cross-platform play at launch, though, which means that players won't be able to participate in matches against PC or PS4 players.

Rocket League has its own fun twist on the sports genre. Does that mean that we'll see annualized releases moving forward? Not so fast, Hagewood says. "We just want to work on Rocket League, and whatever format is best for that is the one we're going to go with. Right now, it seems like it makes the most sense to keep supporting the existing game. As long as the player base supports that, then that's what we're going to continue to do." » Jeff Cork

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» [redacted]
1 to 4-Player Sports (8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Psyonix

» **Developer**
Psyonix

» [redacted]
February

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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

90 SteamWorld Heist

Image & Form's SteamWorld Heist is a different kind of strategy game. Manage an eclectic crew of steam-powered robots as they explore the universe and battle space pirates. SteamWorld Heist's procedurally generated levels constantly throw new challenges your way, but your crew's various abilities and an ever-expanding arsenal of weapons should help you overcome any obstacle.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be dished in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Stay Away. Nothing to see here.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Just Cause 3

Viva la revolution

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Avalanche Studios **Release** December 1 **Rating** M

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Free an island nation from dictatorial rule by blowing up nearly everything in sight

» **Graphics**
The visuals look great, even when the frame rate gets chunky during some of the most intense moments

» **Sound**
The explosions are punctuated with meaty thuds. The increasingly desperate explanations for Rico's actions from the propaganda department are a fun post-mission reward

» **Playability**
Once the controls click, you and Rico can do beautifully destructive things together

» **Entertainment Value**
Blowing up everything loses its anarchic thrill after several dozen times, but it's still a blast

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Rico Rodriguez comes home in Just Cause 3, bringing revolution and his arsenal of devastating toys to the island nation of Medici. Sebastiano Di Ravello may keep his citizenry under tight control, but Rico's been through this before. He's never met a dictator who couldn't be toppled like a statue or who had the military might to endure an extended campaign of sabotage. Players may find their enthusiasm flagging at times, but it's hard not to cackle with glee after watching yet another base bloom into a fiery blossom.

After successfully freeing the citizens of several other nations, Rico turns his attention to his homeland. He's the same vessel for destruction that series veterans are familiar with, a freewheeling maniac who can hijack a helicopter at whim and rain down revolution with a blast of the minigun. He's not the type who overthrows governments by patience and diplomacy. Instead, players crisscross around this open-world sandbox, tearing down propagandist billboards and other instruments of oppression and raising the flags of rebellion.

I spent a lot of time dominating the skies as Batman in Arkham Knight, and at first I found Rico's grappling, parachuting, and wingsuit-based flight comparatively clunky. It didn't immediately click with me, and many of my initial test flights ended by accidentally skidding to a halt on the ground or, more painfully, slamming against cliff faces. Once I got the hang of the timing of using my grappling hooks to create and maintain forward momentum, however, getting around Medici became second nature. It involves a lot of skill and nuance, but the added mobility is worth those early stumbles. Traversal is so efficient that I almost never drove; cars aren't nearly as nimble, and the roads wind so much that they're rarely a direct path to Rico's next destination.

Rico's grappling hook can also magically connect several items together (it's best not to dwell on how), opening the doors for an impressive amount of destructive creativity. In its raw state, you can only use a couple of the tethers, and they're not particularly strong. Complete enough challenges, and you can earn upgrades that increase both the number of cables that you can use at once as well as the pulling strength of those cables. When Rico's adventure begins, he can barely hoist a jeep against a wall, let alone smash a pair of pursuing enemy helicopters into one another. You manually choose when to engage the pulling action, too, which lets you set up elaborate base-ruining connections.

As exhilarating as these moments are, all this destruction feels routine after a while – especially if you make a goal of blowing up every military outpost and freeing every city. Sure, you can connect a bad guy to a gas cylinder, shoot it, and then watch as this crude rocket blasts him into the stratosphere. Those kinds of scenarios can be tough to pull off while you're being shot at, so I often resorted to tried-and-true methods, such as yanking a car toward a baddie or simply tossing a grenade or two. The auto-aim is generously tuned so that you can knock out a set of propaganda speakers while sailing on a parachute, but it comes at the expense of making the on-foot action feel mushy. Once I figured out reliable ways to tear down statues of Di Ravello or water towers, I usually stuck with those, and flew away from the inevitable enemy response until the heat died down. Things feel fresh again when you unlock some of the higher-tier explosive weapons, but those don't arrive until the game is well under way.

Medici's three islands have an abundance of places to destroy, and I had a good time liberating the nation overall. Avalanche does a good job of giving players access to new tools just as it seems the novelty is close to wearing off, right until the end. By the time I finished clearing out the final outpost, I was definitely ready to move on. Medici's a great place to visit, but I'm not prepared to make it a new home – certainly not considering the state I left it in. » **Jeff Cork**

If you die, which can embolden you to try crazy things

Rainbow Six Siege

A slimmed-down combatant struggles with the weight of expectation

Style 1-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** December 1 **Rating** M

7

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Strip Rainbow Six down to its barest essence and rebuild it as a tactics-oriented eSports shooter

» Graphics
Outside of the lighting engine and impressive destructibility, Siege looks dated compared to its contemporaries thanks to dull textures and barren environments

» Sound
From the footsteps of an advancing enemy to the faraway sound of an explosion indicating a perimeter breach, Siege wonderfully uses audio queues to amp the tension

» Playability
Siege abandons the cover system in favor of a fast-paced, gadget-oriented attack. The gunplay is serviceable, but hit detection is sketchy

» Entertainment
The lone multiplayer mode has great promise, but technical shortcomings need to be ironed out. Single-player fans will be disheartened by the lack of meaningful options

» Replay Value
Moderately high

A satisfying blend of measured team tactics, frantic firefights, and high-tech gadgetry has always been the centerpiece of the Rainbow Six experience, but Siege takes a different approach than its predecessors. Singularly focused on creating a balanced competitive playing field, many of the qualities we've come to expect from a Team Rainbow joint are AWOL in Siege. Cooperative campaign? Gone. Deep character customization? Abandoned. Terrorist hunt? Still standing, but hamstrung by weak A.I. and inflexibility. Siege sacrifices it all for the sake of one highly tuned multiplayer mode.

And what a mode it is when everything falls into place. This five-on-five twist on Last Man Standing places the two teams in the roles of attackers and defenders. Before each of the best-of-five rounds starts (or best-of-seven for ranked matches), the attacking team takes control of drones to case the building and hopefully locate the objectives (which can be a hostage to save, a bomb to diffuse, or a weaponized chemical to secure). At the same time, the defenders scramble to fortify their position, laying down barbed wire, reinforcing walls susceptible to breaching, and setting traps. No matter what preparation the defenders make, however, a point of weakness is always present.

The depth and variety of these matches is driven by the cast of operators each team takes into a match, but don't expect the grizzled cast of previous Rainbow Six entries. Siege abandons the Tom Clancy fiction in favor of a G.I. Joe-style ensemble of fighters. Each of the 20 options (10 for attack and 10 for defense) is named for the special ability he or she brings to the fray. Each operative has a natural counter, and coordinating your team make-up is paramount to victory.

The tactical realities of these matches necessitate strong communication between your five teammates, which is both a strength and a weakness for Siege. When you have a group of five planning their strategies and calling out threats, the matches are exhilarating. But if you're playing with teams dominated by players without headsets, the matches inevitably devolve into lone-wolf crusades that almost always end with a loss. Ubisoft added visual cues so players without mics can mark threats and see where teammates are downed, but these are inadequate stand-ins for talking in a fever-pitched firefight.

Given the dependence on communication, Ubisoft curiously opted against implementing a clan infrastructure to enable players to find like-minded gamers craving a more structured experience. If you don't jump into a match with a group of friends, you may need several rounds before you find enough players with mics to bring out the best in the game. Considering the lack of other content surrounding this mode, I'm surprised Siege doesn't offer team names, uniform colors, logos, or eSports standards like spectator mode. Giving players a few more multiplayer modes to play would also go a long way toward rounding out the package.

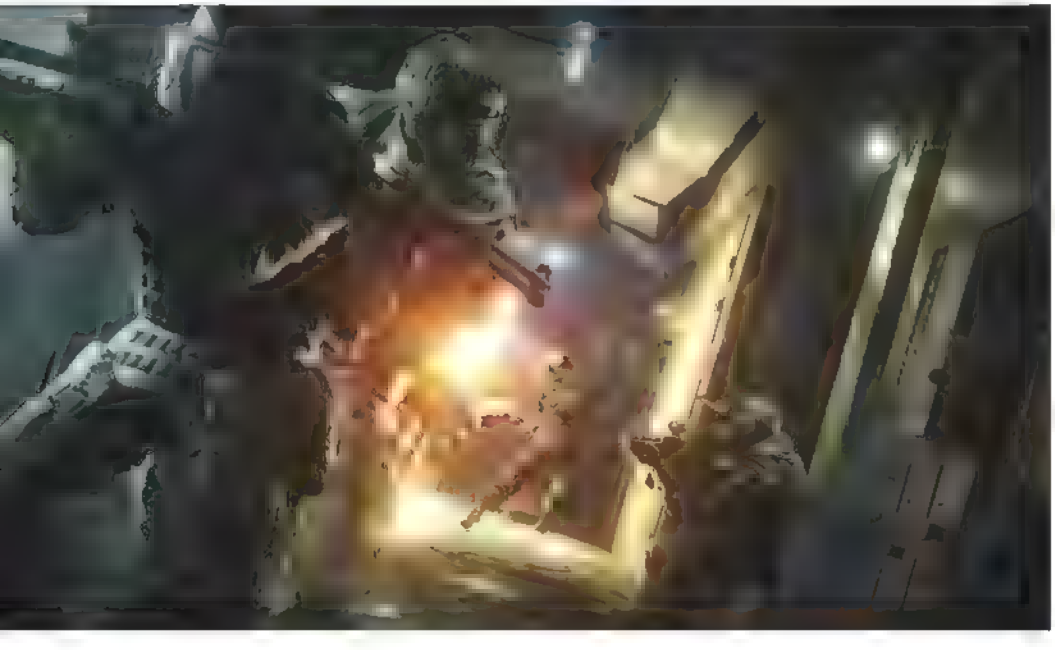
The player customization also lacks the depth you would expect from Rainbow Six. Unlocking the majority of the 20 operative and the limited amount of scopes, barrels, and grips for the various weapons doesn't take too long, like Titanfall, Evolve, and Star Wars Battlefront before it, Siege is missing the long-term progression tail to keep players invested. This is especially disappointing given the abundance of player customization found in previous Rainbow Six titles.

The questionable hit detection may drive some players away as well. I often saw something very different watching killcams than I experienced during my death. While it seemed like I got a handful of rounds off before being dropped, the replay claims I only fired one. These discrepancies can be maddening, and Ubisoft needs to address this quickly given its eSports aspirations. The rappel system is also awkward; don't be surprised to plummet to your death when you think you've attached the rope but haven't.

Fans of the well-crafted, single-player campaigns of previous Rainbow Six games will find nothing of value in Siege. The short tutorial missions lack replay value, and the popular Terrorist Hunt mode, which can be played with up to five friends, gives players little options other than ramping up the difficulty. Locking players out of selecting the map they want to play on is a curious decision, as are many of the battle tactics you see the enemy A.I. employ.

The multiplayer core of Rainbow Six Siege is a great foundation. But given its lack of infrastructure and severe lack of meaningful modes to buttress it, Siege feels slight when compared to its past entries and the other big-name first-person shooter franchises it competes against. The tactical demands Siege puts on players is unlike anything else on the console market today, and may prove enough for those seeking this flavor of first-person-shooter. However, Siege doesn't do enough to unite players who understand the importance of communication or provide variation in rest of the package.

» Matt Bertz



Amplitude

Reviving a classic formula

Style 1 to 4-Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Harmonix **Developer** Harmonix **Release** December 23 **Rating** E

7.75

PS4 • PS3

» **Concept**
Return to one of the progenitors of the note-highway music games, and zone out to its psychedelic electronica vibe

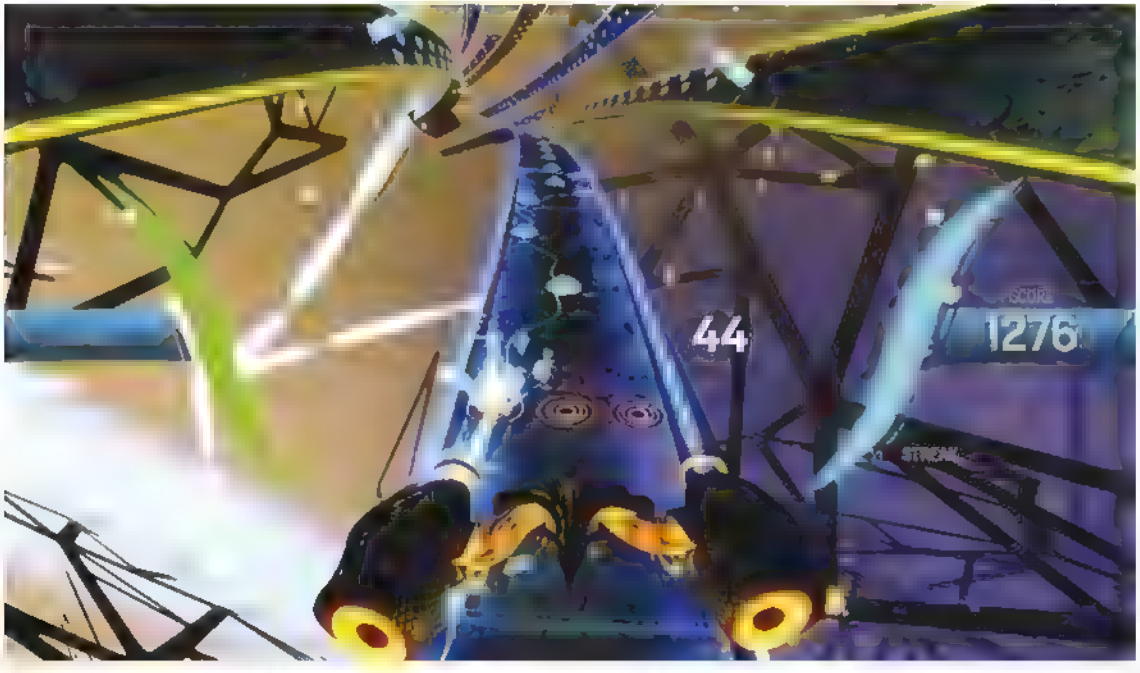
» **Graphics**
Sharp, bright graphics are inviting, but offer little variety. The shifting backdrops can cause eye strain

» **Sound**
A few catchy tunes recall the original Amplitude's strange variety, but many of the songs seem to value rhythmic complexity over musical enjoyment

» **Playability**
Engrossing rhythmic gameplay is easy to grasp. Mastering the note patterns to climb into the expert tier takes a long and enjoyable time

» **Entertainment**
A thrilling variation on the formula that harkens back to genre roots, even if the song catalog lacks the catchy replayability required

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



If you think this game "looks like Rock Band," then you probably don't recall Harmonix's pre-Guitar Hero efforts that helped give rise to the music game phenomenon. Through two games called Frequency and Amplitude, the company made a case for endlessly streaming note highways and beat-matching. Thanks to a nail-biting crowdfunding campaign in 2014, the developer has rebooted the latter game, bringing the original style back for both nostalgic fans and newcomers. But is the magic still there?

From a gameplay perspective, the answer is a resounding yes. Amplitude challenges players to hit several musical bars of a single track, like vocals, drums, or synth, before rapidly tapping over into another track to continue a streak of unbroken notes. Unlike modern music games, the process is additive (as you layer in new aspects of the mix) rather than subtractive (losing a track through failure) so you have a sense that you're creating your own personal mix. Switching between instruments lends a frantic, scrambling insistence to the tunes, even as you make rapid-fire decisions about which track can keep your streak alive. As you climb through the difficulty settings, your fingers begin to move faster than your conscious mind, to the point that you're often surprised that you nailed a particular passage. When paired with the psychedelic background imagery and thumping electric beats, you can easily lose yourself in the flow.

That's why I found myself disappointed in some of the music, which has the potential to pull you out of that flow. The original Amplitude excelled at mixing up sound and genre styles, but this entry has less variety. That's particularly true of the mostly Harmonix-authored songs in the concept-album campaign, which loosely tells the story about efforts to awaken a comatose woman. The campaign songs do little to distinguish themselves one from the other, and lean heavily on heavy drum and bass parts that push the boundaries of eclectic. These songs aren't bad, but they lack the potent catchiness that invites endless replayability – a hallmark of the original Amplitude. Nonetheless, a few entries in the separate Quickplay catalog nail the audio aesthetic and pop with infectious energy, like the driving melodies of Freezepop's "Phantoms," Ingrid Lukas' sexy smooth "Muze," and even the remixed version of an old Amplitude favorite, Symbion Project's "Synthesized."

Most of the 30 songs unlock through persistent play. Sadly, a few of the best songs are trapped behind an archaic approach to progression. You're required to get high scores on campaign songs, but you can't replay those songs individually – you must make your way through the entire 15-song campaign again if you didn't nail top marks the first time around. For most players, that means playing on a lower difficulty than would be fun just to ensure you get enough points to acquire a new song. It's a small but befuddling design choice that slows forward momentum.

Amplitude is engaging in both solo and multiplayer, since the game adjusts its formula to suit. Single-player is all about precision and focus, demanding a careful attention to power-up usage and streak maintenance. Harmonix has also included the unlockable FreQ Mode for solo players, in which players can alter the display into the circular format seen in the original Frequency. Multiplayer lacks online play, but its local options are robust. Four-player free-for-all quickplay encourages competition, using power-ups to bounce your opponents off their tracks or screw with their visuals. Cooperative and team-based play offer further ways to enjoy with friends, and it's enormously fun to feel like you're crafting a song together as a group.

It's hard to overstate my enthusiasm for the original Amplitude. While I have reservations about some of the music selections and progression, that doesn't stop me from enjoying this revival. Amplitude is a taste of the past, but it's far from outdated. » Matt Miller

Dirt Rally

Taking the hard road to the top

8.5

gamesfarmer SILVER

Style 1-Player Racing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Codemasters
Developer Codemasters Racing Studio **Release** December 7 **Rating** E

PC

» Concept
Codemasters puts out its first rally-only title in a long time

» Graphics
The regular rally racing is gorgeous, but I encountered dropped frames during the multi-car rallycross

» Sound
Listening to a car game usually gets old fast, but I don't think I'll ever get tired of the cacophony of an engine popping and crackling, the crunching gravel, and screeching tires

» Playability
It handles well enough that you know your failures and successes are yours alone

» Entertainment
Dirt Rally isn't deep in every area, but the gameplay alone makes this my favorite rally game

» Replay Value
Moderately High

It's easy to approach a rally game as if it's another racing title. Speed, fighting for control, and a strong competitive spirit rule both, but rally racing is a different breed. If the focus of regular racing is primarily the finish, then rally racing is a marathon where you die and are reborn a million times before you reach the end. Corners aren't the only place where you gain or lose time. Every second is an attempt to conquer a growing fear. Victory at the finish line – and knowing the dangers you pushed past to get there – is an exhale of relief as much as jubilation.

To tap into the moments that make rally racing so exhilarating, you need a game that isn't just about sliding around hairpin turns. Dirt Rally's superior car handling communicates the vibrancy and challenge, creating an unparalleled experience. Dirt Rally isn't alone in translating velocity, physics, weight transfer, traction, and other intangibles into a video game package. However, the way it taxes these elements every second you're on the course in a flurry of ever-changing demands is what elevates the genre.

For example, I get a little air coming over the crest of a hill, which is not a fist-pumping moment. Being that the crest is at a slight angle, I have to prepare my takeoff angle before I go airborne, and once I land I'm immediately trying to gather the car back up and get ready for the bend ahead. I'm on light gravel so I shouldn't expect too much of a slide or spin of the tires, but I also have to flirt with when and how much brake I apply versus maintaining speed. Throw in a rock on the outside of the already-narrow bend that will likely destroy my car if I'm not careful. This isn't some big setpiece in a "boss battle" of a track; it's just a typical sequence you have to deal with that feels wonderful in your hands.

The co-driver is good about calling out what lies ahead through a sometimes complicated lexicon (but when he says "Don't cut" for a corner, that's a clear directive). You cannot ignore any of it, nor listen to all of it. The sweet spot occurs when you get into that auto-pilot zone, internalizing the next 100 or so yards while also focusing on the danger at hand. This is gaming as tense and demanding as you've ever known it.

Dirt Rally isn't just for the hardcore, although it could do a better job of inviting newcomers. The career mode's championships increase in difficulty and the cars you buy (spanning the sport's eras) get faster and harder to control, but the title could use a tutorial section or the ability to rewind if you crash like in previous Codemasters titles. You can only restart back at the beginning or reset the car back on the track for a time penalty, which you'll definitely do. This is in a mode that has its share of grinding for requisite championship points and cash to buy cars specifically for the hill climb and rallycross disciplines.

You unlock upgrades (better engine performance, the ability to tweak the handling, etc.), and a team consisting of a crew chief and up to four engineers that help repair damage between stages faster. The perks' excitement is limited to speeding up the rate at which your car upgrades and is fractured over different car makes and models. The framework around the racing gameplay could be more inviting, like featuring more unlocks (liveries or cars) or prizes around your achievements – that slightly fatuous fluff that makes us feel like we're getting somewhere.

Beating the stage and overall rally times of Codemasters' online challenges are a natural fit for rally racing's solo structure, but more group-oriented play is available if you join a league where you can post your best times among your peers and go up against them simultaneously in rallycross races.

Dirt Rally can be unforgiving, unrelenting, and seemingly as high in its demands as the infamous hill climb at Pikes Peak. But the journey is sublime.

» Matthew Kato

Oxenfree

Making allies to confront the supernatural

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Night School Studio **Developer** Night School Studio **Release** January 15 **Rating** T

7.75

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Discover the secrets of a remote island while making dialogue choices to influence your relationships and investigation

» **Graphics**
The simple art style is unique. The colorful landscapes stand out, but also leave much to the imagination

» **Sound**
Fantastic voice acting drives this experience. The sound effects and music get the job done, but don't stand out

» **Playability**
An easy game to pick up and play, allowing you to choose how much extra time you want to invest into exploring or dialogue

» **Entertainment**
Oxenfree has charm and experiments with choice in a fun way, but it has a few missteps that prevent it from reaching its full potential

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

What if you combined a John Hughes movie with a Wes Craven film? This is the essence of Oxenfree. The complex relationships of ragtag teens mixed with supernatural elements reminds me of scary movies from the '80s, but Oxenfree also tries to be a narrative game that reacts to your decisions. It is a dialogue-heavy experience, and a lot of its success depends on that. The character interactions are the best part of the journey, but like a lot of games that delve into choice, the results of your decisions aren't always satisfying.

Oxenfree follows a group of unlikely companions on an island for a night of partying. It was supposed to be a huge rager, but only five people show up and they all have strained relationships. You play as Alex, who is dealing with accepting her new stepbrother, Jonas (who she brings along). You also encounter the resident mean girl, her quieter sidekick, and the happy-go-lucky best friend. Seeing these characters grapple with complex and relatable issues is a highlight; you may think you have their archetypes pegged, but the characters' family and romantic lives come to the forefront and demonstrate that not everyone is so easily classified.

While this is definitely a coming-of-age tale, it's just as much as a ghost story. The group accidentally opens a rift, causing spirits to infringe on their weekend of fun. Getting off the island becomes the priority, and your interactions are all framed by that goal. This means you spend a lot of time exploring, but I like how it feels like a performance. The stage and scenes are set, but you choose your lines and actions. As Alex, you select different dialogue options that pop up frequently, but you can also interact with the environment how you choose. For instance, in one scene by a campfire on the beach, you can stoke the fire, sit by it, throw rocks in the water, and more. These small actions don't impact the plot at all, but they help set the mood and give you a sense of control. I enjoyed the freedom of acting out these scenes according to my interpretation of Alex.

The most important aspect of the gameplay is choosing Alex's responses. Unlike most peripheral actions, your dialogue can alter the game and change your relationships, what information you learn, and how your ending turns out. The story keeps trucking along, and doesn't stop to let you know your next words are about to have a big impact on the game. That's one of the main problems in Oxenfree: You never know when you're making an important choice or just selecting dialogue to keep Alex a participant in the story, which can have some unintended consequences.

Your different selections factor into some branching paths, and I was excited to see the outcome of my actions – until I got to the end and didn't understand how I arrived at the outcomes. I'm a fan of unpredictable choices and things not always turning out how you expect, but something feels fundamentally wrong when players think they're influencing events in one direction, and the exact opposite happens instead.

At the very least, the dialogue choices are varied, almost always giving you something interesting to say – and that's a big feat for a game with this much communication. Conversations tackle a slew of decisions, like choosing between different characters to talk to and assist. You have limited time to make your selections, so you're discouraged from agonizing over the "correct" option. Also, while Oxenfree tackles some serious issues, it has a great sense of humor with memorable lines. The dialogue comes off as authentic and genuine, providing some of the best exchanges I've encountered.

Outside of these main beats, you use a radio to converse with the spirit world and navigate the island by climbing and jumping through its wooded areas. The gameplay is more like performing the motions and focusing on the discussions at hand. However, a lot of scenes and expectations are turned on their head when Night School Studio taps into the spiritual world and its impact on the characters; these are the most creative and thrilling sequences in Oxenfree. Still, as a longtime fan of spooky movies, I felt the actual plot and explanation for the weird occurrences could have been more cohesive.

To Oxenfree's credit, it kept me engaged the whole way through. I constantly wanted to see where it was going and where my choices would lead. Night School Studio clearly wasn't afraid to experiment and try some different and interesting things with presentation in regards to a narrative-based, choice-driven game. As much as I loved parts of the overall experience, others let me down. Even so, I enjoyed learning about these characters and seeing them grow through my actions.

» Kimberley Wallace

SteamWorld Heist

Gear up for this strategy gem

8.5

GAME OF THE MONTH SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Image & Form
Developer Image & Form **Release** December 10 **Rating** E10+

3DS

» Concept
A colorful turn-based strategy game, reminiscent of games like XCOM, that has been pressed into 2D

» Graphics
Crisp and clean, these steampunk-inspired robots have an almost comic-book feel

» Sound
My head bounced more than once to the beat of these old-timey western tunes

» Playability
Some of the later missions offer up a decent challenge, but the basic mechanics are simple enough for anyone to understand

» Entertainment
Fans of strategy titles won't want to bypass this under-the-radar hit

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Two years ago, Image & Form released SteamWorld Dig, a platforming mining simulation with light Metroid elements. The game was fun, but many bypassed this downloadable 3DS title altogether. Thankfully, Image & Form has figured out how to expand on its SteamWorld universe with another SteamWorld project that can stand on its own completely. This time around, the team was clearly inspired by turn-based strategy games like XCOM. However, SteamWorld Heist's unique twist is that all of the action takes place from a 2D side-scrolling view. Surprisingly, this system works fairly well.

The game follows a space-faring smuggler named Piper Faraday and her crew of steam-powered robots as they journey through space, board enemy pirate ships, and make off with armfuls of mechanical loot. Missions play out in a series of turn-based shootouts where you manage your crew's specialized set of skills to disassemble rival robotic crews. During your characters' turns, you must fine-tune the trajectory of their projectiles so they hit the enemy on the other side of the room and not the wall behind them.

SteamWorld Heist's strategy mechanics are easy enough to grasp, and they are initially fun, but I was worried about Image & Form's ability to expand on this simple system over the long term. Thankfully, your characters level up after combat and slowly unlock a series of new skills that turn them into a fiercer fighting team. Some abilities simply give your heroes more health or a stronger melee punch, but other skills – such as the ability to move twice before shooting or to create an aura that buffs your teammates – add some much-needed depth to each encounter.

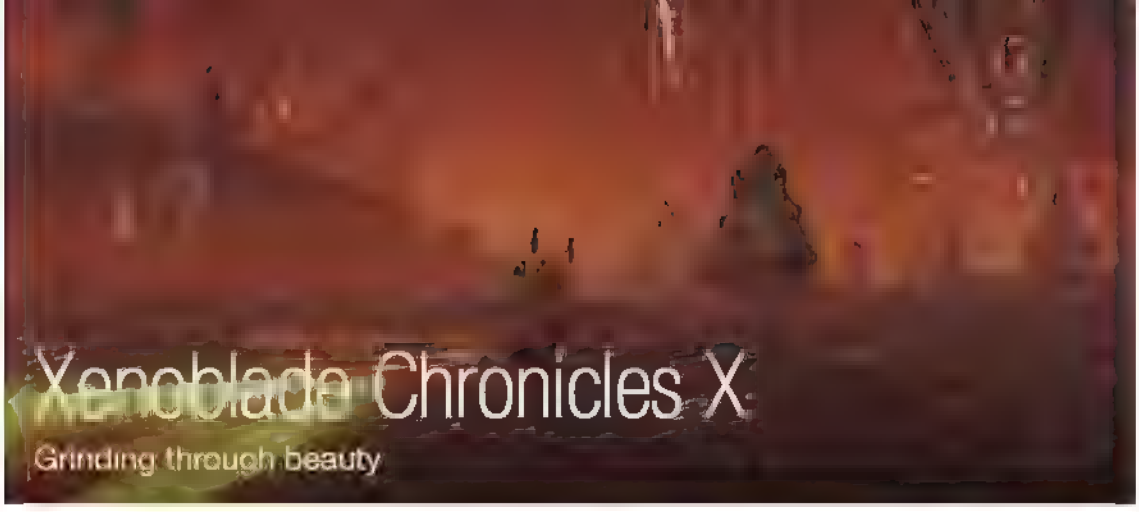
SteamWorld Heist's procedurally generated levels also add some extra wrinkles to the action. Some missions had me frantically clearing out an enemy ship before a countdown timer hit zero and the engine detonated. In another mission, my crew started hunkered down in the center of a ship while waves of enemies beared down on us from all sides. Another memorable mission had me clearing out an entire space station full of alien robots with only a single character. This mission variety, coupled with the unpredictable level layouts, gave me plenty of reasons to go back to older missions and farm loot and experience.

Most of this loot comes in the form of new weapons, and each character has their own weapon specialization. Sniper pistols have attached laser sights, which make it easy to perform billiards-like trick shots off walls, however some sighted weapons won't let you move and shoot at the same time. Meanwhile, heavy weapons, like grenade launchers, can turn groups of enemies into junk in a single explosion, but stray grenades can also bounce erratically and cause friendly fire. Guns aren't the only spoils of war, either, and I enjoyed how the ample array of secondary tools, which increased my squaddies' sprint distance, allowed for much-needed repairs or improved their critical-hit damage.

Unfortunately, all of this loot feeds into the game's biggest flaw. At the beginning, your ship's cargo hold is rather small, which limits the amount of gear you can carry between missions. You can buy more space from vendors scattered across the universe, but you always have a finite amount of carrying capacity to work with, so you generally have to sell some gear each time a mission ends. This limited cargo system didn't seem to serve a purpose other than to diminish my enthusiasm for raiding pirate ships, and often prevented me from experimenting with new weapons or tools because I didn't have the room for them.

In spite of SteamWorld Heist's limited inventory system, I recommend making space on your 3DS for this charming title. Its unique 2D strategy isn't as deep as something like XCOM, but I never grew tired of ricocheting a pistol shot off a wall and into the red eyes of a villainous space thug. I can't wait to see what SteamWorld project Image & Form surprises us with next.

» Ben Reeves



Xenoblade Chronicles X

Grinding through beauty

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft **Release** December 4 **Rating** T

7.25

» **Concept**
Explore a beautiful alien world in a lengthy and complex variation on classic Japanese RPGs

» **Graphics**
One of the best looking games on the Wii U, filled with fascinating landscapes and creatures

» **Sound**
A good English voice cast does little to alleviate the repetitive and schlocky soundtrack, populated by embarrassing vocal parts

» **Playability**
Webs of interlocking combat, upgrade, and exploration systems take many hours to fully understand

» **Entertainment**
Deep and satisfying in the early hours, but a tremendously lengthy and tedious grind gradually slows down the fun in the run-up to the conclusion

» **Replay Value**
Low

Getting lost in games with massive worlds and hundreds of side-quests is a joy, but experiences of this size come with an inherent challenge. They need strong hooks in the early hours to draw the player in, but they also require surprises and depth in the later hours to keep the excitement high. Xenoblade Chronicles X excels at the first step, presenting a vibrant world and an intriguing combat system. While a few story and gameplay surprises wait for the persistent player in the crucial late game, the insistence on a painfully slow grind results in too much tedium for too little payoff.

The Earth has been destroyed by warring alien species, and a lone colony ship crashes on the distant planet Mira with the chance to reignite humanity. Pulled from the wreckage, your created hero or heroine joins a crew of explorers and soldiers as they pull themselves back from the brink of extinction. Early adventures feel momentous and interesting, as you get to know the scope and variety of the action and setting, whether you're discovering a forgotten valley or unearthing ancient alien wreckage.

While your party expands over the many hours that follow, only a few characters ever stand in the spotlight long enough to be considered main characters. However, your strangely mute protagonist sadly isn't one of them. It feels odd in a story like this to have the player character sidelined; you feel more like an empty shell along for the ride, rather than a custom hero at the center of the action. Awkward attempts at humor stunt the storytelling potential, including an endlessly repeated joke about eating one of the alien party members that isn't funny the first time, and is far less so the 50th.

Mira is breathtaking and massive. Monolith Soft has done a remarkable job crafting a fantastic alien landscape and filling it with towering behemoths and strange flora. Exploration is a big part of the experience; climbing mountains, leaping through foliage, and swimming beneath waterfalls reveals dozens of survey points around the world. Discovery of these points expands your economic potential for mining and money acquisition, which in turn fuels the exhaustive economy of weapons, armor, and mecha parts. Unfortunately, the game often demands that you exhaustively analyze swaths of the planet before progressing to the next story mission, leading to the first of many barriers to a natural narrative flow. It doesn't matter if you want to progress the plot; you could be spending hours grinding to meet the arbitrary requirements to keep the narrative rolling. On the bright side, the helpful fast-travel system at least allows for quick traversal to data points you've already visited.

As you're learning it, combat is complex and interesting, inspired in part by hotbar-based MMO design. Your special abilities do damage, buff teammates, debuff enemies, and stack effects. Timing melee and ranged attacks while actively pursuing abilities that combo together leads to far greater efficiency. A freeform class system offers several distinct combat playstyles, and you can freely explore any of the classes, switching up whenever you want. However, after dozens of hours, you inevitably settle into an optimum combat rhythm with a maxed-out class, and for the many more dozens of hours that follow, you're triggering that same queue of actions again and again.

About halfway through, Xenoblade Chronicles X offers its biggest gameplay twist through the introduction of skells. These awesome transforming mecha dramatically expand your combat power and exploration capability, which is further expanded a few chapters later with the addition of flight capabilities. The skell designs are gorgeous, and the piloting experience is intense and empowering, but it makes the on-foot gear and abilities you've worked for obsolete (with the exception of a few missions that demand you dismount). I'm also not a fan of skell replacement after its destruction. Rather than respawn besides you at a nearby checkpoint, you're forced to take a trip back to HQ to pick up your replacement, presuming you still have stacks of insurance on your machine.

An enormous amount of content beckons in Xenoblade Chronicles X, including a hefty selection of gear and monsters meant to be tackled after the story concludes. A wealth of character-focused missions flesh out the otherwise threadbare cast, and hundreds of smaller basic missions encourage you to hunt, gather, and converse. However, this content rarely grabbed my attention, and frequently wasted my time. Gathering missions often provide little to no guidance about where to find required materials. Creature hunts feel practically identical. Social missions often demand you hop back and forth and back again between two characters on opposite sides of the main city, just to kick off conversation threads. Whichever mission you tackle, the star-based difficulty designations do little to communicate whether you're ready for the task. And like with exploration, many of these missions are required in order to move forward through the main story thread.

I began Xenoblade Chronicles X filled with enthusiasm for its intriguing world and gorgeous visuals. But like the hackneyed songs that play ad nauseum throughout, the gameplay doesn't have enough depth or entertainment to sustain such a prolonged experience. Players with great patience for grinding are rewarded with intriguing places to discover and creatures to fight, but for me, only a handful of the 100 hours I spent wandering Mira felt like a true adventure. » Matt Miller

Social Engagement

Xenoblade Chronicles X is a single-player epic, but it has nods to a more social experience for those looking to engage with a community. You can scout NPC versions of other players' heroes and bring them into your squad for a limited time. The randomly assigned 32-player squads can't all play together, but they share messages and contribute to squad missions to bring down a certain number of enemies. The only true four-player multiplayer comes from special time-attack missions, and after beating a squad mission, you can join up to tackle a tough boss out in the world. These systems offer a chance for social engagement, but they're positioned more as a fun add-on, and mostly for players who have already confronted everything else the game has to offer.

PLAYSTATION 4

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Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Bloodborne: The Old Hunters	9.25	Jan-16
Call of Duty: Black Ops III	9	Dec-15
Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Disgaea 5: Alliance of Vengeance	8.5	Nov-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
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Guitar Hero Live	7.5	Dec-15
King's Quest Chapter 1: A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
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Lego Jurassic World	8	Aug-15
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Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 1: The Order of the Stone	8.25	Dec-15
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Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 5 – The Vault of the Traveler	8	Jan-16
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WWE 2K16	6.25	Jan-16

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Destiny: The Taken King	9.5	Nov-15
Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
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NHL 16	7.5	Nov-15
Pro Evolution Soccer 2016	9	Nov-15
Rare Replay	8.75	Oct-15
Rise of the Tomb Raider	9.5	Jan-16

4 | Devil's Third

Platform Wii U **Release** December 11 **Rating** M

If it had released 10 years ago, it may have been clever. Today, the clunky mechanics and outdated design transport you back to a time when the bar was much lower. – Joe Juba

7.5 | Fast Racing Neo

Platform Wii U **Release** December 10 **Rating** E

Fast Racing Neo is a pretty game with solid racing and a fantastic sense of speed. It's a sparse experience without much to engage you outside of straightforward racing, but works as a quality reminder of the high speed sci-fi racing genre that we thought had been forgotten. – Kyle Hilliard

7.5 | Nuclear Throne

Platform PS4, Vita, PC, Mac **Release** December 5 **Rating** NA

Nuclear Throne somehow manages to be both fun and frustrating at the same time, making for an interesting roguelike shooter that will keep you coming back for more. – Daniel Tack

6.75 | Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon

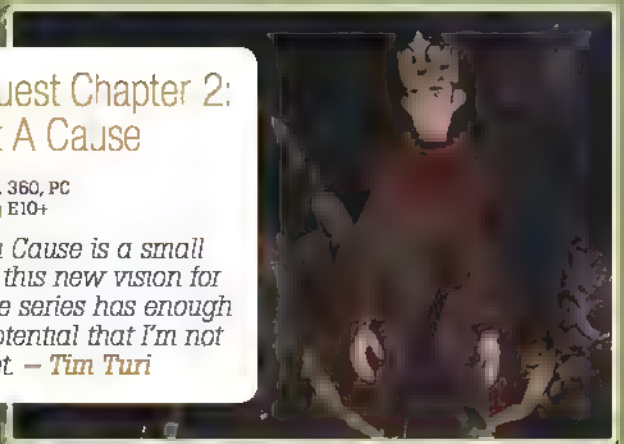
Platform 3DS **Release** November 20 **Rating** E

The Pokémon Mystery Dungeon series still has issues, but it is improving. A better, more focused sense of humor and combat tweaks help move the action along at a better pace, but Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon still pales in comparison to the core RPG installments. – Kyle Hilliard

7.5 | King's Quest Chapter 2: Rubble Without A Cause

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC
Release December 15 **Rating** E10+

Rubble Without a Cause is a small step backward for this new vision for King's Quest, but the series has enough momentum and potential that I'm not scared off yet. – Tim Turi



6.75 | Pokémon Picross

Platform 3DS **Release** December 3 **Rating** E

I love the idea of Pokémon Picross, and it is executed well. The core game got its hooks into me quickly, but as a puzzle game with no random elements, it doesn't translate well to the world of free-to-play. – Kyle Hilliard

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

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MAKING MAX PAYNE

How Hong Kong kung fu and family photo shoots built a noir thriller

By Kyle Hilliard

Max Payne was not the first game to come out of Finnish developer Remedy Entertainment, but it became the developer's first major success and set a standard and aesthetic style for the studio moving forward. Max's overwrought noir dialogue, dark tone, story focus, and third-person shooting with an unconventional hook have been translated into staples of Remedy games, even up to its upcoming Xbox One game, Quantum Break, which we featured on our cover in December 2015.

Following the release of the studio's first game, Death Rally in 1996, Remedy threw around ideas for a follow-up covering everything from The Legend of Zelda-inspired fantasy to making an early prototype that used an overhead perspective starring a hard-boiled cop. The latter moved forward into production. "There was a concept called Dark Justice, which was a kind of near-future, drug gang-war concept," says writer Sam Lake. "I wanted a film-noir, hard-boiled feeling to it – wanted to bring kind of a private eye type main character into it and [Dark Justice] became, step by step, Max Payne."

The game changed tremendously over the course of its development, shifting from the top-down perspective to third-person, abandoning the near-future and gang-war components, but embracing the tough-minded lead detective and the drug-focused story to eventually become Max Payne. Remedy was working with 3D Realms at the time, and received permission to expand and change the game from its original pitch. "They were pushing us to be more ambitious with this," Lake says. "Tomb Raider was coming out with a third-person camera, and that kind of felt like, 'We can do this. Let's go in this direction.' That's how it started."

But let time, the game's most notable hook and the aspect separating it from competing third-person shooters, came along during this iterative process. "We were all watching a lot of Hong Kong action movies, like John Woo stuff, and we were saying, 'We should do something like that – all of those cool slow-mo, bullet time things. We need to find a way to bring some of that coolness into the gameplay,'" Lake says. Some early versions took bullet-time out of the hands of the player, assigning it to specific story-moments and rooms before it became a crucial aspect of the players' interaction with the gun combat.

Max Payne's interstitial story moments are told through a series of comic vignettes as opposed to animated cutscenes. The initial idea was to take photos and use them as reference to create watercolor images on paper, which would then be used in the game. "It was ambitious and it

The Max Payne Grimace

Few celebrities of the video game industry are recognized primarily for what Remedy writer Sam Lake describes as a "constipated face." People ask him to make the Max Payne face at events, and he even poked fun at the legacy of the expression in a recent video asking Remedy fans to send in their best Max Payne grimace after offering a humorous walkthrough of how to do it.

The face is a result of the limited technology of the time. Max Payne's face had no animation, but it did have three swappable expressions – a neutral face, a smirk, and the now famous shooting face. "The face for shooting was kind of me going like, 'Well, if I was shooting a gun and there was a bright muzzle flash, how would I...?' and then I was in front of the mirror going... [Lake laughs while making the expression] something like this." Lake says. Though players rarely saw the face while playing the game, it did make its way into nearly every published screenshot. "Because of what we were doing with the particles and we could freeze and go in slow mode – that was really, really cool – an eye-candy thing. So we wanted to show that in every shot, so Max had his shooting face on for everything."

was a cool idea to use watercolors and ink, but it was way too slow," Lake says. As the game progressed, the photographs became more integral, and the watercolor painting idea was abandoned in favor of applying watercolor filters with Photoshop.

Many of the models who made it into these comic book scenes are members of the Remedy development staff, friends and family, and most notably, Lake, who modeled for Max. It began with Lake and friends dressing up as cyber-punk soldiers for a photoshoot to be featured in his university's role-playing association magazine. "I brought those photos to work and I was saying, 'We should do something like this – this is a way to tell a story with a graphic novel. The best I can recall, because I was posing in those photos, everyone went, 'Okay, you are the guy then,'" Lake says.

With a budget too small to allow for professional actors, Lake found himself in the game. "Suddenly, the character started to look like me. I honestly don't know if I had known that at the time, if I would have just shrugged and said 'Okay,' I maybe would have thought about it a bit more," Lake says when remembering his initial agreement to model for Max.

Lake recruited the rest of the cast, and in some cases, pulled in literally anyone near his one-room rental apartment to be a model. "All the models in the game are from close groups of friends or relatives that I just tracked in," Lake recalls. "The janitor in that house where I was living ended up being the mob boss, my mother ended up being the main bad guy in Nicole Horne, my dad is the shady government official Alfred Woden, and my brother was Vinny Cognitti, the mobster."

Despite the comparatively budgeted storytelling mechanics, Max Payne was a huge success, winning many game of the year awards. Game Informer gave the Xbox version a 9, and its Metacritic score reflects a similar level of positivity across the board.

The game has sold more than four million copies and cemented bullet time as a widely-used gameplay mechanic. It was one of the earliest examples of a developer treating its dialogue and story with the same level of respect as its gameplay and graphics, and assured the ongoing legacy of video gaming's slowest shooter and the studio that created him.

Entering Right Behind

The obvious assumed inspiration for Max Payne's bullet-time shooting mechanic is *The Matrix*, which released two years prior to the game in 1999, but the relationship between the film and the game are coincidental. Max Payne's bullet-time mechanics were well in development when *The Matrix* released, but Remedy saw the film's release as positive as opposed to getting beaten to the punch. "*Matrix*, in many ways was, I feel, a big stroke of luck for us in the sense that Hong Kong action theater, from the western perspective, was still a relatively little known, kind of a niche thing," says Max Payne writer Sam Lake. "*Matrix* really brought that kind of stylization and coolness in action. It was huge, and it came nicely before us, setting up a perfect launch platform for Max Payne to come out."

THE TOP 50 GAMES OF 2015

BY THE NUMBERS

The video game industry faced some big changes in 2015, as developers abandoned last-gen hardware and indie games continued their meteoric rise in popularity. To see how things changed in 2015, here's a statistical breakdown of our Top 50 list. The numbers in parentheses represent the changes over last year. \

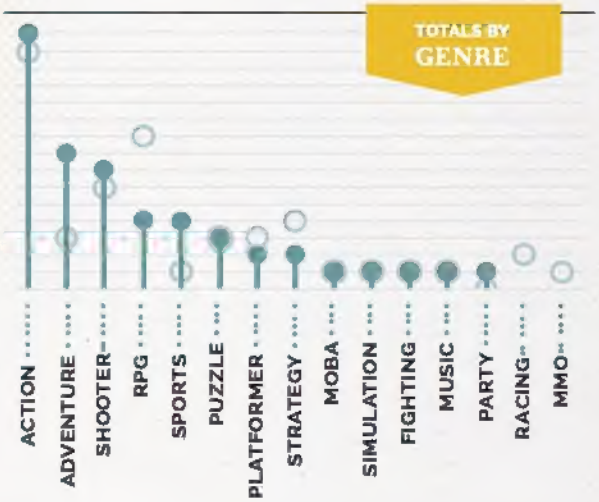
NEW SERIES ON THE LIST

26(+3)

RETURNING SERIES ON THE LIST

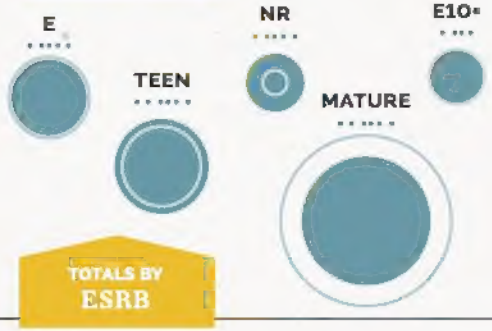
24(-3)

TOTALS BY GENRE



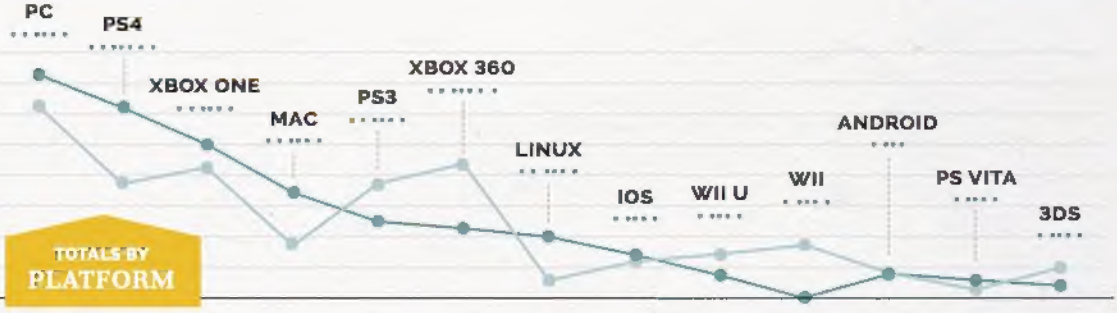
EXCLUSIVES BY PLATFORM

TOTALS BY ESRB



TOTALS BY PUBLISHER

TOTALS BY PLATFORM



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